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EAST IS ALWAYS EAST

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ANN'S AN IDIOT
WARNING
THE DREAM MAN
ASHES OF DESIRE
PENELOPE FINDS OUT
CONCEALED TURNINGS
A PASSIONATE REBEL
MADEMOISELLE DAHLIA
UNDER THE MOSQUITO CURTAIN
RAINBOW IN THE SPRAY
AT THE END OF THE AVENUE
A LITTLE FLAT IN THE TEMPLE

EAST IS ALWAYS EAST

By

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(WINIFRED MARY SCOTT)

Author of "Ann's an Idiot"



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TO ALL THE NICE PEOPLE AT
THE GRAND CHALET, ESPECIALLY
MADAME HALDI

■

PART I

CHAPTER I

MRS. METCALFE was tired. She was tired because she had been listening to her sister-in-law for more than half an hour. Over and over again she had repeated herself, saying in a hard metallic voice, "Yes, but think what a magnificent thing it would be for the girls. You can't afford, at a time like this, to think only of yourself, Madeline. Pull yourself together!"

"Pull yourself together." The drastic words waked Mrs. Metcalfe up. She had never cared for her sister-in-law and now she felt that she almost detested her. Paul, her late husband, had never cared for his sister either, and one of the last things he had said before he died was that she was not to let old Louisa try to run her. And now here she was running her and her affairs as hard as ever she could. She opened her round blue eyes and stared at her sister-in-law.

"Can't you see what a magnificent thing it would be for the girls? India and cold weather in a military station. Both of them would marry at once. It's a most generous offer. Your brother in such a good position, too!" Miss Metcalfe was angular and weather-beaten and had a face like a horse. She had never cared for her dead brother's wife. The Metcalfes were

County, and kept hosts of dogs, and always had all the windows open and hardly any fires, and even if there was a fire you couldn't feel it because of the draught. Paul, Louisa's brother, had been a dreamer and queer, and with his small income of eight hundred a year had pottered about the garden and done a little rough shooting and no work. And then on one disastrous day he had gone to a garden party and fallen in love with the daughter of a neighbouring vicar. For fifteen years this foolish couple had lived a limited but very peaceful life, buried in the country, as far away from the other Metcalfes as they could get, and then Paul had died from a severe attack of influenza, leaving his wife with twin daughters aged sixteen. That was two years ago.

"Yes, but I don't know that I want to go out to India." Mrs. Metcalfe, with her eyes now very wide open indeed, began to talk rather fast. Secretly she was afraid of Louisa. She was afraid of her calm assumption of always being in the right. Mrs. Metcalfe had the sense to know that she herself was very often in the wrong. Paul also had made her feel that sometimes, although he had tried not to. There was so much that she had not known: things like the date when pheasant shooting began and partridge shooting, and she had always thought that it was horribly cruel to hunt a fox to its death, although perhaps it was more cruel to allow it to live and be caught in a trap. But no one would ever think of catching a stag in a trap, and yet people, and well-bred people too, hunted a stag to its death, and what was the

excuse for that? she had once asked her husband with blazing eyes.

But on the whole Paul had been kind and Mrs. Metcalfe had been very happy in the little cottage tucked away in a quiet Devonshire valley. And she would have been peacefully there now if it hadn't been for Flavia, the elder of the twins and dazzlingly pretty. Both of them were dazzlingly pretty, although Mrs. Metcalfe, who secretly liked the younger one, April, much the best, thought she was the prettier. But other people said that the girls could not be distinguished apart. So Mrs. Metcalfe thought that it was perhaps only her great love for April that made her think her prettier, but she never confided to anyone that she did.

"Yes, but what should we do in India?" Mrs. Metcalfe fixed her eyes on the rather dingy wallpaper and prayed that she would be firm. If only her daughters had not gone out to a cinema. Louisa had arrived without giving any notice. She generally did that.

"What can you possibly do in a horrible boarding-house like this?" said Miss Metcalfe, staring round her and not caring a bit that the kindly careworn old waiter was clearing away the coffee-cups from the glass-topped tables in the lounge and must have heard.

"I don't think it is horrible," said Mrs. Metcalfe thinking of the excellent lunch that her sister-in-law had just eaten at her expense. Why, oh why had she ever told her about her brother's invitation to India? It had only been from a low motive too. Arthur was in the I.C.S. and all the Metcalfes' relations were in

the Army, and Louisa always spoke as if anyone who wasn't in the Army was hardly alive at all. Paul had been too delicate to go into the Army, and having an income of his own, he hardly had to do anything. But it was grander to be in the I.C.S., thought Mrs. Metcalfe childishly, setting her teeth and thinking that she would say so and not care what Louisa said or did, if the opportunity arose.

"That depends on what you are accustomed to," said Miss Metcalfe crushingly, returning to her assault on the hotel. "Personally I can imagine no greater misfortune than to have to spend even a week in surroundings like these."

"The girls love it. We have hardly ever moved from Pear Tree Cottage. This is their first real glimpse of London," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "They love going to the cinema and looking in at shops. They think this boarding-house is nice. It is nice," ended Mrs. Metcalfe fiercely. Her eyes filled with angry tears as she thought of the joyful excitement of the move from Devonshire to Ferndale Road. Pear Tree Cottage let for a year. The excited selection of a boarding-house from the tremulously flapping sheets of Bradshaw. An old Bradshaw certainly, but the prompt reply from the Private Hotel in Ferndale Road showed that the selected boarding-house still existed. It called itself a Private Hotel in Bradshaw. Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly remembered that and shot it out like a small bullet from an air pistol. "It isn't a boarding-house at all; it's a Private Hotel," she said.

And somehow that last remark made Miss Metcalfe

feel that this sister-in-law of hers was not worth bothering about at all. Anyone who could attempt to justify her present mode of living was surely beyond argument. She had come to look her up because she had heard that she was in town. And in course of conversation the news had leaked out that she had the chance of going to India for the cold weather and taking the two girls with her. Obviously the thing to do, because the girls, from photographs timidly shown, were apparently very good-looking. However, Madeline was not going to do this obvious thing; better to leave her alone to reap the results of her own stupidity. Miss Metcalfe got up to go, diving down the sides of the rather shabby easy chair to retrieve her workmanlike gloves.

"Oh, must you go?" Mrs. Metcalfe, showing herself to be still young and slim, also got up out of her chair. Was then this dread visit at an end? She could hardly believe it.

"Yes, I've got several things to fit in before dinner." Miss Metcalfe was brief and businesslike. "I am sorry that I haven't seen the girls. Give them my love, will you?"

"Yes, I will," said Mrs. Metcalfe eagerly.

"What do they think about this visit to India?" enquired Miss Metcalfe, walking with long, leisurely strides to the tall, black painted door of the lounge.

"They don't know anything about it," replied Mrs. Metcalfe guiltily. "They went off very early, before the second post came."

"They don't know anything about it! But then of

course they'll insist on going," exclaimed Miss Metcalfe, stopping dead in the middle of the floor.

"Yes, I know. I expect we're sure to go," said Mrs. Metcalfe placidly. For a moment or two she looked quite young. Louisa was a donkey, she thought complacently.

"But you gave me to understand——" Miss Metcalfe was really angry now. She stood still and glared at her sister-in-law and her weather-beaten face flushed.

"Yes, I know. But you always take it for granted that I'm such an idiot," said Mrs. Metcalfe unexpectedly. "Just because I don't understand things like hunting and dogs and wasn't presented: all the things that you think matter, and I don't think matter a bit. You think I'm hopeless. And now Paul is dead and I am left with the twins, and you immediately think that I'm not going to do the best I can for them. But I am. Perhaps you can't imagine girls like mine that like just pottering about and being with their mother," said Mrs. Metcalfe, thinking of April with a warm flame round her heart, and shivering a little because she knew that Flavia wasn't in the least like that really.

"Well!" and then, as there was obviously nothing else to say, Miss Metcalfe shook hands with her sister-in-law and walked down the short flight of steps to the pavement. And the last sight of her that Madeline had was of Louisa signalling to a bus to stop, and the driver of it not taking the faintest notice and careering triumphantly to a stopping-place quite a hundred yards ahead.

CHAPTER II

THE Metcalfe girls certainly were astonishingly good-looking. The few callow youths in the hotel could not keep their eyes off them. Flavia was delighted. She held herself rather more erect and made little jerky movements of her pencilled eyebrows. April felt uncomfortable when she did it and hated it. She was afraid of Flavia or she would have refused to go out with her. People stared in buses and Tubes. April felt responsible, especially as they were dressed alike. In the Church and Commercial Stores, for instance, Flavia almost flirted with the assistants. And then went away to pay the bill at the desk, and the young man left behind the counter, too flustered to remember which sister was which, began feverishly to carry on the interrupted conversation with April. It was all degrading, thought April, miserable and shy, and returning bold glances with a fugitive fluttering of her eyelids that made the person who had levelled them feel dreadfully ashamed and instantly cease to do so. One tall elderly man at the hotel was soon able to distinguish the sisters apart. He watched them as they came into the lounge in the evening for their coffee. He watched their mother and thought that when she was a girl she must have been almost as good-looking. But he did not speak to them because

he knew from long experience that as a rule it was a mistake to get to know people in London hotels. He only stayed in this quiet, shabby one himself because it was quiet, and very near the Natural History Museum, where he was engaged on important research work.

But the open admiration that Flavia received went to her head like a cocktail. It was too marvellous after existence in Devonshire. "Thank Heaven I made Mother give up that beastly cottage," she said excitedly that night, as the girls undressed in their large comfortable bedroom on the second floor.

"How can you call it beastly?" April, in her silk princess petticoat, was sitting on the bed unfastening her suspenders. Her knees were young and round. She slipped her silk stockings down over her ankles and feet and then shuffled them over her feet and let them fall on the floor. Her down-bent face was melancholy as she solemnly squeezed her toes and then abruptly laughed. "Can you move your little toe away from the one next to it, Flavia?" she asked.

"No, and I'm not going to try," said Flavia. She had her round chin very close to the mirror. "Look," she said suddenly.

"What?" April turned round.

"Come closer; you can't see from there." Flavia spoke excitedly. Her face was triumphant. Yes, she was really most frightfully pretty, there was no doubt about it. And they might still have been stuck away in Devonshire if it hadn't been for her. "See?" She swung round to face her sister.

"Oh, that horrible stuff on your lips! Don't! Flavia, it's hideous. *Don't*. Your lips are so nice and pink anyhow." April's voice was eager. How could she explain to Flavia that it didn't improve her at all?

"Everyone puts it on," said Flavia calmly. "I'm not at all sure that I shan't have my eyebrows plucked too," she continued.

"If you do, you'll get old much quicker than I shall," said April excitedly. Terror filled her soul. She would have to go out with this dreadfully got-up sister of hers and people would stare more than ever. The staring was beginning to get on April's nerves. Why had they ever come to London? It made their mother ill, too; she had gone to bed when they came back from the cinema because she was so tired after Aunt Louisa's visit. Too tired even to talk, thought April, remembering with a clutch at her heart the lovely calm evenings by the fire in Pear Tree Cottage.

"Do you really think I don't look nice with lipstick on?" Flavia was now not so cock-a-hoop as she had been. Inwardly she thought a good deal of what April said, although she would have died rather than confess it.

"I think you look ghastly; common," said April decidedly. She watched her sister crumpling up her lips and sucking them. The soft delicate pink of them emerged again.

"There you are. Can't you see that you look much nicer without it?" April, small and slender in her pale pink petticoat, was smiling. "It doesn't go with your hair—the red," she explained. "You don't need those things—yet."

"No, perhaps I don't." Flavia was complacent. "You get into bed: don't wait for me," she said after a pause. "I'm going to try on all my hats, and perhaps alter the felt one back to front."

"All right." April returned to her end of the room. That would mean that the light would be on for ages longer, she thought, but it wasn't any good minding. But as she lay with her face turned to the high white ceiling she wondered why Flavia thought such a terrific amount about what she looked like. Who cared what you looked like if you were nice? pondered April, twisting herself so that her face was turned away from the bright electric light. For instance, that nice man in the lounge who never spoke to anyone, but who sat drinking his coffee as if he knew exactly what everyone else was doing although he never even looked up. He was old, thought April briefly, quite forty-five and not a bit good-looking. And yet there was something about his clean-shaven mouth that was frightfully attractive. Only kind words could come out of it, thought April, beginning to feel sleepy although Flavia's shadow still danced aggravatingly over the ceiling. But perhaps she would soon be done. Although, no—April raised herself jerkily and rather uncertainly from her pillow.

"Would you have the paste thing where I've put it or rather further back?" Flavia's voice was clear. "Good heavens, you don't mean to say that you've gone to sleep already?"

"Oh no!" April's voice was stammering and apologetic. She tried to see and could not. "I'll get out of

bed and come round to the glass," she said anxiously. "I don't know—I think it's glary or something and that's why I can't see."

"You can't see because you're half asleep," said Flavia impatiently. "Come on; I want to sew it in before I get into bed."

And as April stood yawning and shivering a little under the bright light Flavia still spoke impatiently. "I can't think how we come to be twins at all," she said, "we're so frightfully different. Now is that right?"

"Perfectly," said April, trying to be really interested and only able to think of the rapture it would be to be cosily back in bed again.

CHAPTER III

MRS. METCALFE had gone to bed directly after her sister-in-law's visit for two reasons. One was that she was really tired. Mrs. Metcalfe was just forty-three, a tricky age for a highly-strung woman who has never really been satisfied emotionally. And the other was that she felt that she could not propound the idea of going to India to her children without a little more thought about it first. Flavia would want to go; Mrs. Metcalfe was quite certain about that. April might or might not want to go, but in any event she would be overruled by Flavia. As for what she wanted to do herself, Mrs. Metcalfe did not know. At the moment, she only felt that she wanted to be left alone. Letting Pear Tree Cottage had been an upheaval to her after the uneventful life she had led for so long. The packing up and leaving cupboards and drawers empty for the incoming tenants had been tiring. April had helped as much as she could, but Flavia had done nothing but make rather drastic suggestions. Certainly looking extremely pretty as she made them, but Mrs. Metcalfe had almost been ashamed of the unwelcome thought that one so soon got used to a person being pretty, but never used to him or her being selfish. Paul had been selfish in a way, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling herself hideous and unnatural at

even being able to think such a thing now that he was dead.

And now she lay and twisted about in her comfortable bed and reproached herself for having dismissed the girls with only a lazy murmur when they had come in keen to tell her all about what they had been doing since they had left the hotel that morning. But somehow she could not rouse herself. Louisa had tired her: tired and irritated her, and she could not undertake anything more until the next morning. She would sleep on her brother's invitation and tell the girls about it in the morning.

And she did so. Sitting up in bed looking very young and nice with her shingled hair, Mrs. Metcalfe did not have breakfast: she contented herself with two slices of brown bread and butter with her early tea. The girls did have breakfast and they arrived from it gasping.

"The temperature of that dining-room! How the people stand it I can't think!" Flavia had cast herself into the one easy chair and had begun to fan herself with the *Morning Post*.

"Yes, it's astounding." Mrs. Metcalfe had secretly taken hold of April's hand, who had come up close to the bed. "I'll take your tray away, Madeline," April was smiling.

"You are not to call me by my Christian name, April!" Mrs. Metcalfe's eyes were glinting with laughter as she spoke.

"Why? Mother's so stiff." April was walking to the door with the tray tucked under her arm. She came

back and sat down on the end of the bed. "You're desperately lazy," she said slowly.

"I'm not in the least lazy," said Mrs. Metcalfe. Even April, accustomed as she was to it, glowed inwardly at the love in her mother's eyes. "I've got something to tell you both," she said suddenly. "Something I can tell you better if I'm really warm and comfortable. It's this. I've heard from Uncle Arthur—you know, the one in India. He wants us all to go out and stay with him for six months."

"When?" Flavia spoke first, after a breathless silence.

"Soon. In two months' time. To take our passages for the middle of October. The place where he is, Wandara, in the Punjab, is quite cold in the winter. Like a mild English winter, he says it is, only much nicer because it is dry."

"Could we have fires out there?" April, from the end of the bed, spoke rapidly. Mrs. Metcalfe, looking at her child, felt a sensation of tears at her heart. The first thought for her! How could one ever be miserable about anything with a child like this, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, turning to fumble about under the pillow for her handkerchief.

"Yes, darling, of course we could. Uncle Arthur often talks about his lovely wood fires." Mrs. Metcalfe's eyes were tender. And then, conscience-stricken, she turned quickly to glance at her elder daughter. "What do you think about it, Flavia?" she asked.

"Think about it!" Flavia's face was flushed and excited, "Why it's the most gorgeous, the most heavenly thing in the world," she gasped. "Mother!

what a chance for us. Think of seeing it all: India, and the voyage and everything. Why I feel quite cracked already. Let's go and get our tickets to-day. Can we?"

"Yes, I don't see why not. The sooner we book them the better, and I believe you don't have to pay at once." Mrs. Metcalfe made a little movement of her feet.

April stirred and spoke. "Can we afford it, darling?" she asked. Her tender little brain was busy. How could she find out if her mother really wanted to go? she wondered. She herself did, desperately, and so of course did Flavia. But Madeline? The uprooting from Pear Tree Cottage had meant a great deal to her mother, April knew. And now another uprooting. Sometimes Madeline looked tired and as if she only wanted to be let alone. How could she find out what she really felt?

"I shall simply adore it," said Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly. She disregarded April's suggestion that it was going to cost a great deal of money. It was, but she would manage that somehow. She would sell something, and the six months' visit would cost them very little because Arthur had made it very clear that they were to be his guests. Paul had left her with an income of eight hundred a year. Well, supposing she sold out enough to produce six hundred pounds she would still have lots of income left. Mrs. Metcalfe had thought all that out earlier that morning as she had lain and stared at the ceiling, waiting for her early tea.

"Would you really adore it?" April's down-bent

eyes had lost their look of tender anxiety. She turned them blazing on her mother. "Oh, I think I shall simply explode, I want to go so much," she said, "Flavia, just think of it—the voyage and everything! Dances every night, perhaps! Mother, you will really have to get yourself some nice dresses for the evening," said April.

"Yes, we shall want some clothes," said Flavia emphatically. "We'll go to Shaftesbury Avenue, they've got some heavenly things there. April and I were looking at them yesterday. Mother, when can we begin to get started about it all?"

"To-day," said Mrs. Metcalfe. Her heart was singing in the most ridiculous way because again April had thought of her first. This was going to be the most wonderful adventure in the world for all of them, she thought. She laughed out loud.

"You are not to call me by my Christian name on the boat, April," she said. "People will be simply scandalized if you do."

"No, they won't. They'll know that it's because you're such a pet," said April. She got off the end of the bed and walked up to her mother. "We are both always in blue and you've got to fit yourself out in the most entrancing mole colour," she said. "Tiny little hats squashed down over your eyes with neat little paste ornaments in them, and dance dresses that fluff out. I don't see why you shouldn't have just as much fun as we do," said April, suddenly looking thoughtful as it struck her that her mother did look astoundingly young. Not in the least like a stiff parent.

But Flavia was bored. It often bored her to see April and her mother together. They were so like sisters. April had got one sister, herself, thought Flavia decidedly, getting up out of her chair and suggesting that it was time they went.

April followed meekly. And Mrs. Metcalfe, left alone, tried not to think dreadful disloyal thoughts about how heavenly it would be if Flavia married very happily in India and left April and her free to travel about together and do exactly what they liked. But she couldn't help thinking these thoughts, and so to stop it she got up. Louisa might scoff at the unpretentious little hotel in Ferndale Road, but at any rate they gave 'you awfully nice boiling-hot baths for nothing, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, collecting all her washing things in a flowered indiarubber sponge-bag and preparing to start off on her quest for the largest bathroom with the newest bath mat, already marked down during her few days' stay at the slim hotel in the long terrace of slim houses.

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CHAPTER IV

BEING a very understanding woman Mrs. Metcalfe knew exactly what would please her daughters most in the way of fitting themselves out for this great adventure. Flavia had excellent taste and was a very good shopper. Mrs. Metcalfe could trust her implicitly with any amount of money. So she went to see her nice broker in the City, took his advice, and sold out what he advised her to sell out. After the passages were paid for she had three hundred pounds left. She gave each of the girls sixty pounds; told them briefly the sort of clothes that they would want; said that she wished them to continue to dress alike and then left them to spend it as they chose. Both girls already had very nice moleskin coats, given them by an accommodating godmother. That they would want them in Wandara was certain, said Mrs. Metcalfe, and they would also want them for the first part of the voyage as they were going to start from Tilbury, and even the Mediterranean could be cold in late September and early October. They would also want quite four nice evening dresses, said their mother, who had found out all about everything from an old friend of hers who had married, gone out to India, and then come back and settled down in Eastbourne. But lots of the clothes that they had already would do. People who went East always got

far too much, admonished the same friend from Eastbourne. "And for Heaven's sake don't buy topis till you get there," she wrote excitedly. "If you go ashore at Port Said, take a sun umbrella and wear an ordinary hat. If you arrive in Wandara to stay with the Collector looking a fright in the wrong topis you're finished for the whole of the cold weather," wrote this same friend dramatically.

And fortunately the three women in the nice hotel in Ferndale Road were intelligent enough to listen to, and profit by, this intelligent advice. Both girls were wild with excitement at having so much money to spend. Every day was a delirium of shopping. They prowled up and down Shaftesbury Avenue staring in at windows. Flavia was brave enough to go into shops and come out again if she didn't like the things they showed her. April was made nervous and self-conscious by this, but had to put up with it. And in the end she knew that Flavia had been right. Their outfit was beautiful. Their evening dresses, ridiculously inexpensive, were filmy and alluring. On one dramatic evening they called their mother into their bedroom and gave her a dress rehearsal. And then Mrs. Metcalfe was suddenly afraid. She was taking these two beautiful girls out to the East and she had no one to help her or advise her. Supposing anything happened to them? Supposing some unprincipled scoundrel got hold of her tender, helpless little April. Flavia was so much better able to take care of herself. But April! Her little snow-drop of a child, born when the snowdrops were just at their most beautiful after a late winter in the little

Devonshire village. Married men were the danger in India, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, she had often heard it. Married men with their wives and families securely tucked away in England. You didn't know that they were married until it was too late. Her precious little child's heart, perhaps given innocently away, to be flung back at her after a dreadful agonizing interim. While the girls paraded up and down the room under the bright light Mrs. Metcalfe thought terrified thoughts. Her doing, all this! Supposing that any harm came of it?

And then she suddenly reflected that after all scores of girls went out to India every year. And that Arthur, being a widower, was very sensible. He would know beforehand whether people were married or not and tell her, so that she could warn the girls if she saw them becoming involved. That it was all going to be all right, as things always were all right if you did not worry. And that with two such lovely daughters she ought never to have a moment's unhappiness about anything. Mrs Metcalfe sat still with closed eyes as the girls had told her to do, while they changed into something else. And then as she sat there like that, she got a perfectly illogical thought that she too would like to dress up in some of her nice new evening clothes and parade up and down in front of somebody who would be interested and pleased. But who was there who would be? And then Mrs. Metcalfe flushed guiltily as she knew who there was. The tall middle-aged man who sat in the lounge and read his paper and spoke to nobody. Once or twice she had seen him watching her

and then he had looked down at his paper again. There was something in his glance that had made her think that he thought she was nice. Nothing stupid, of course, she was far too old for that. But just nice. And thinking this, it was time for her to open her eyes again. Yes, certainly, her children had chosen their outfit beautifully: Mrs. Metcalfe was smiling with genuine pleasure and approval. Flavia was a very clever girl. Everything was just right, and the lovely starry blue suited them both to perfection.

"I'm so glad you're pleased. Now what about your clothes?" April had taken off the last lovely filmy dance dress and was standing in her silk princess petticoat. Flavia was busy with many cardboard boxes and lots of tissue paper.

"Would you like to see one of my dinner dresses? Really, would you?" Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly felt excited.

"Of course we would!" Even Flavia was enthusiastic. "Go and put it on. You've heaps of time before we need change. Don't wear it for dinner, though, or you'll crush it so. Those velvet chairs in the lounge stick."

"All right," and Mrs. Metcalfe had gone. She ran downstairs. Because even she had been pleased when she had seen herself in the long glass in the palely upholstered fitting room in the big shop. It had not been dear, either. She got into the soft velvet folds of it eagerly. What a mercy she had kept her figure, she thought, tipping the mirror on her dressing-table at an angle so that it caught the reflection of the long glass

in the wardrobe. And the three-fold necklace of pearls from Ciro's was lovely too. The paste clasp made them look so much more as if they were real. Mrs. Metcalfe showed her still excellent teeth in a little happy smile as she switched off the electric light and ran out on to the landing. She felt like a girl again in her beautiful new dress. Happier than a girl really, because, from her own recollection youth was not the desperately happy time that it was supposed to be. One was too self-distrustful: too apprehensive of the unknown future that yawned ahead of one, to be really happy, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, not looking where she was going because she was so absorbed in her sudden thought of the two young things upstairs whom she had brought into the world and whom she had not the least idea really how to bring up.

This was the opportunity that John Maxwell had been waiting for and that he knew would come his way if he waited long enough. He burst out laughing.

"Not a bit," he smiled as Mrs. Metcalfe gasped a hurried apology.

"Oh, but I must have hurt you!"

"No, you didn't."

"I wasn't looking where I was going. I'm going upstairs to my daughters to show them my new dress. We're all going out to India," said Mrs. Metcalfe in a sudden burst of confidence. "We've all bought new clothes and I suddenly felt that I wanted to show them to my girls."

"I don't wonder." John Maxwell stood looking down

on to Mrs. Metcalfe's dark hair, in which white threads were beginning to sparkle. "Show it to me first though. I love nice clothes."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, of course I do. What man doesn't? Yes, it suits you well." John Maxwell's deep grey eyes were appreciative. Mrs. Metcalfe was a very pretty woman, he decided briefly. Where was her husband? Unless she was a widow, why was she alone like this?

"You must think I'm funny to talk to you like this," said Mrs. Metcalfe, speaking rather breathlessly. "But have you ever had the feeling that you want someone of your own age to think you look nice? I've got it awfully just now. I suppose I'm not quite old enough to absolutely find all my happiness in thinking that other people look nice."

"Yes, I know the feeling very well indeed," said John Maxwell. "Most people of our age get it sooner or later. Walk along as far as that wardrobe and back again, and then I'll give you a considered opinion on the great garment."

Mrs. Metcalfe walked. And as she walked she felt a thrill of excitement at this sudden adventure. She thought of her two girls upstairs waiting for her and felt that she didn't mind. This tall man looked so awfully nice in his tails and white tie. He must be going out to a dinner party. A swift disappointment ran over her at the thought that he would therefore not be in the lounge when they went in to have their coffee there.

"Yes, it's charming," John Maxwell spoke after a

little pause. Mrs. Metcalfe had come back and was standing looking up at him. "Black suits you," he said. "When are you going out to India?"

"At the end of the month. My brother is out there in the I.C.S. I am a widow," Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly got a strong feeling that she wanted this nice man to know all about her.

"I see. You have two very beautiful daughters," said John Maxwell warmly. "And it is amazing how alike they are. At first I could not tell them apart. Now I can."

"Yes?"

"One of them has a slightly different expression on her mouth," said John Maxwell.

"Ah, that must be April," exclaimed Mrs. Metcalfe. And then she suddenly remembered April, upstairs waiting for her. "I must go," she hesitated.

"Yes, and so must I," John Maxwell drew a flat gold watch on a watered ribbon out of his pocket. "Well, thank you for letting me share in the dress rehearsal," he smiled.

"Yes," and then shyly and like a child Mrs. Metcalfe bolted away up the staircase without saying any more. But when she got to the top she unwisely turned round. And there he was still standing and looking up after her. Mrs. Metcalfe hesitated, and then very reprehensibly ran all the way down the stairs again.

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself to-night wherever you're going," she stammered.

"I'm sure I shall. But it was nice of you to think of it. That's what one misses too, someone really to mind

whether one enjoys oneself or not," said John Maxwell, and the look in his eyes was very delightful.

"Oh, my daughters do mind," Mrs. Metcalfe was suddenly frightened at what she had done. She turned to bolt up the stairs again.

"I am sure they do." John Maxwell said the words to Mrs. Metcalfe's frightened and retreating back. He laughed a little quietly to himself as without looking back again she fled round the corner of the landing. And then he went on down the stairs into the narrow hall to collect a taxi.

CHAPTER V

APRIL was the first to notice that her mother looked more spry. But she kept her discovery to herself. By now both the girls had got to know Mr. Maxwell too. He had quietly taken for granted that as he knew their mother he would of course get to know them as well. They now very often sat together in the lounge after dinner to drink their coffee, although during the day they very rarely saw him. But that was because Flavia and April were nearly always out shopping. April sometimes felt conscience-stricken about it.

"We do leave mother most frightfully alone," she said one day, as in a 79 bus they went careering off up the Brompton Road.

"She doesn't mind. Besides, we must get our shopping done. We've only got three weeks now until we start. And mother gets so tired if we go in and out of shops all the time. It's the only way to get what one wants, though," said Flavia, frowning down her delicate nose to try to locate a smut that had impertinently lodged on it.

"Yes, I know, but still——" and then April fell silent. Certainly Madeline didn't seem to mind, she reflected. Only that morning, for instance, she had asked her if she wouldn't like to come with them. And she had said no, that she was busy. And when April had asked her

how she was busy, she had turned a delicate pink and said vaguely that she had something to do at Harrods'. April had not questioned further, but for some reason a dreadful stab had seemed to penetrate her heart. What was there to do that Madeline could prefer to do that did not include her, she wondered? What was there that she herself would prefer rather than be with her mother? Her mother filled her horizon. She was only living for the moment when this dreadful ceaseless drive of shopping would be over and they could sit quietly on the deck of a big comfortable steamer. They had all three got lovely deck-chairs. Flavia would not be much in hers, reflected April with a little wry smile. But that would be all the better, because she and her mother could sit quietly together, talking if they wanted to talk and not if they didn't. Just the same old lovely serene companionship of Pear Tree Cottage. How desperately April longed for it only she knew. But it would be here in three weeks, she thought, looking out on to the brown dried-up grass of Hyde Park and the ceaseless flow of traffic sweeping in at the big Connaught Gate.

And meanwhile Mrs. Metcalfe, having seen her children safely off for their day's shopping, went up to her bedroom and sat down on the bed and stared straight in front of her. She, too, was going out to lunch, but not yet. She had some letters to write first. Also she had to decide which hat to wear. At the moment the hat was the more important of the two. Mrs. Metcalfe went to the shelf in her wardrobe and got all the hats out. She would wear the one that April had

helped her choose. And the neat coat and skirt that went with it. Also the silver fox fur that she had bought in the July Sales. Mrs. Metcalfe dressed herself all up and stood in front of the glass and made silly little movements with her hands and feet. And then she suddenly tore off the close-fitting hat and flung it into a chair. She was a complete fool, she told herself passionately. As if he meant anything at all except just a delightful friendship. Men always had women friends nowadays; it was part of the new way of going on.

However, she was at Harrods' dreadfully before the time he had said. But to conceal it she went and wandered about through the different departments. She was to meet him in the long gallery lounge on the top floor. "And if I am a few minutes late don't be angry with me and go away," he had said, smiling delightfully. "My time is not altogether my own, although very nearly so, thank Heaven."

However, he was punctual. Before her, Mrs. Metcalfe diplomatically arranged. John Maxwell, smiling his quiet smile, wondered what this charming woman would do if she knew that he had seen her arrive half an hour too soon and take the non-stop lift to the top floor where they had arranged to meet! He himself at the moment had been doing some business in the banking section and had seen her come in through the big swing doors, hurrying like a child. She had stopped dead and stared at the clock, but all the same had made for the non-stop lift and gone up in it. He had laughed to himself as he turned to speak pleasantly to the clerk. That was what he loved about her, her childish spontaneity.

And yet, did he love her? That was the bother, how was he to know? Love between two well-bred unattached people of opposite sexes should mean marriage. But did one undertake marriage with a widow with two grown up and beautiful daughters? Would it not be better to wait until the two beautiful daughters were married, which they certainly would be after a cold weather in India. Although, again, there was always the chance that the sweet mother of the beautiful daughters would be snapped up in marriage too. John Maxwell felt thoroughly unsettled as he glanced amiably through the brass grille to the young man behind it. As a rule he knew his own mind instantly. That was why, ten years before, he had ruthlessly broken off his engagement with a girl to whom he was devotedly attached. Her fault really: she had sent him by mistake a letter intended for another man. There might or might not have been anything at the back of it. But his trust and confidence in the girl were gone for ever. Her tears and protestations of innocence were utterly useless. He only gazed at her and asked her to keep the ring as the sight of it would only remind him of what he was anxious to forget.

After that John Maxwell steered clear of women. But Madeline Metcalfe attracted him deeply. Was it because he obviously attracted her? She was blushing delightfully as she came towards him.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting," she said nervously.

"No, you haven't. You're deliciously punctual. If only women always were," said John, smiling down at her.

"I was early really. Half an hour too soon," said Mrs. Metcalfe in a sudden burst of confidence. "I was so afraid of being late because I was looking forward to it so."

"Were you really? How sweet of you to say so," said John slowly. He suddenly made up his mind. "Don't let's have lunch here," he said, "it's dull. I mean, there's no adventure about it. Let's go somewhere else. Come along to the lift and we'll think of a nice place while we go down."

"Yes, but have you time?" Mrs. Metcalfe was hurrying along to keep pace with the tall man by her side.

"Loads of time. I'm fed to the teeth with research. We'll get a taxi and go off somewhere. That is to say, if you have time, too," said John, suddenly stopping short.

"Oh, yes, I've got nothing to do at all," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply. She smiled with pleasure as they shot downwards in the lift, and crossed the wide hall to stand outside the big swing doors waiting for a taxi.

"Where would you like to go? Have you any pet place?" They were safely in the taxi now and John was looking at her.

"Well. . . ." Mrs. Metcalfe hesitated. "It might not be grand enough for you: I mean, not the sort of place that you would like," she explained. "But I have always wanted to go to one of those restaurants in Soho. Not a very expensive one," she stammered.

"They are none of them expensive," smiled John. "But the food is uncommonly good and one always feels rather out on the spree when one is lunching or

dining in Soho," he said. "Come along then, we'll go to the Chantecler, in Frith Street. It's unconventional but absolutely true to type. I've had many an excellent meal there."

"Oh, how heavenly!" and then Mrs. Metcalfe sat silent. If only she did not feel suddenly so guilty, she thought. She had told the girls that she was going to Harrods'. Soho was not Harrods', thought Mrs. Metcalfe, as the taxi buzzed along and then suddenly came to a standstill in a solid block of traffic.

"Well, still enjoying yourself?" John Maxwell was an intensely perceptive man. He glanced down at the woman by his side. Something was wrong. What? he wondered simply.

"I've just remembered that I told the girls that I was going to Harrods'. I didn't say anything about lunch or you or anything," faltered Mrs. Metcalfe, her eyes filling with stupid tears. "Fancy if they found out, they would think that I had deceived them."

"Would you rather go back to Harrods' then?" John's eyes were clear and reflective. Marry this woman! Supposing he didn't get the chance; how was he going to endure life any more?

"Do you think that I ought to?" said Mrs. Metcalfe miserably.

"No, I don't," said John frankly. "Take for example the ten to one chance that anything happened to the girls and they went to look for you there. They wouldn't find you; the place is a rabbit warren. They would go to the hotel. And you will be back at the hotel very nearly as quickly from Soho as you would be from

Harrods'. It's further away, I admit, but only about ten minutes in a taxi."

"Oh!"

"Satisfied?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply. Not only satisfied but blissfully and completely happy, she thought wildly, wrenching her eyes away from his steady gaze and looking out of the window.

And John sat silent. Largely because there was nothing to say. He also sat and stared out of the window on his side. His thoughts also were in a whirl. Until about a week ago he had not dreamed of falling in love for a second time. Until an hour before that he had not thought of ever being in love sufficiently to risk the dreadful and irrevocable adventure of marriage. And now it abruptly seemed to him that anything else would be simply stupid. The delicious fun that he could have with this slender, well-bred woman for ever by his side. The gorgeous adventure, for instance, of a holiday spent abroad together. And then his thoughts suddenly fell rather flat. Abroad—of course, she was going abroad. And soon too; in three weeks. He would have to say something in a day or two. But not yet; it was too soon.

"Well, we're nearly there. Too slummy for you?" The taxi was picking its way carefully through the narrow streets of Soho.

"Oh no, I love it. I've always wanted to come to one of these restaurants. There's something so exciting about it." Mrs. Metcalfe's lips were parted a little. Her eyes were smiling and excited. She forgot that she was forty-three and a parent. "You see, I've always lived in

the depth of the country," she explained. "Both before I was married and after. This is almost the first time I've ever really been able to wander about London and enjoy myself."

"I see." John's keen eyes were on the shop windows sliding past. "Here we are," he said. He helped Mrs. Metcalfe out of the taxi and stood and paid the man, giving him obviously a good deal too much. Everyone was pleased and smiling, including the *maitre d'hôtel* who welcomed them into the friendly low-ceilinged restaurant and showed them to a nice table in the corner. A fatherly old waiter came padding up and showed them the menu with an air of friendly anticipation. John glanced at it and then across the table at Mrs. Metcalfe. She had taken off her gloves and her delicate hands were folded together in her lap. She was looking about her with an air of expectancy.

"What would you like?" asked John.

"What is there?" inquired Mrs. Metcalfe, trying not to beam with pleasure, and failing.

"A great deal," said John laughing up at the old waiter.

"You choose," said Mrs. Metcalfe, also smiling at the waiter and wondering with a little leap of excitement in her veins if he thought that they were husband and wife.

"All right." John ran his eyes down the gaily decorated card and made a careful choice. The waiter lingered.

"What will you drink?" asked John.

"Water," said Mrs. Metcalfe promptly.

The waiter and John exchanged amused glances.

John ordered a light lager for himself, and the waiter vanished.

"Ought I to have said that I would drink something?" asked Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"No. Apparently they don't scowl at you here if you drink what you like," said John. "In some places they do. But I've soothed his wounded feelings by ordering some lager and we'll have coffee at the end."

"If I drink anything it always goes to my head," said Mrs. Metcalfe apologetically.

"Then you are wise to avoid it," said John, and he laughed across the table. When he laughed his eyes took on a very kind and friendly look. Mrs. Metcalfe saw the look and thought with a little pang that in three weeks' time she would not see it any more. India suddenly looked menacing and unfriendly. Fancy if she had not had that letter from her brother they could have stayed on at the hotel almost indefinitely. She sighed and began to fumble with her bread.

"Why the heavy sigh?"

"I don't know. I begin to feel that India won't be so much fun as I thought it would," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Really? And what makes you feel that?"

"I don't know," faltered Mrs. Metcalfe stupidly.

"Don't you? I do," thought John, and he felt inclined to laugh aloud from sheer delight and pleasure. The waiter padding up broke the rather difficult moment. The soup was delicious and just the right temperature. Mrs. Metcalfe found that she was more hungry than she had thought she was. He ate so nicely

too: although she did not look at John she knew that he was eating nicely.

"Tell me what gave you the idea of going out to India?" The fish had come and gone and John sat back in his chair and folded his arms. Mrs. Metcalfe was a pleasant person to take out to lunch. She did not talk all the time.

"I just had the letter from my brother and the girls wanted to go," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply.

"And what about you?"

"I don't think I thought about it. Of course, if they want to go I do too," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Exemplary mother."

"No, don't say that; I'm not in the least. You know I'm not," said Mrs. Metcalfe, flushing. "I told you a long time ago that I did sometimes feel that I wanted someone of my own age to want to do just exactly the same things that I do. But I can't have it. People of my age can't. April does, almost entirely though. I adore April," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply.

"Do you?" and somehow this little simple remark gave John Maxwell a feeling of discomfort. Mothers were sometimes like that about a child, especially if they were widows. Generally it was a son who sent them off the deep end, but of course a charming and sympathetic daughter might have the same effect. Everything made subject to the beloved child. And then the beloved child married, and either its wife or husband didn't like you and your last state was worse than your first.

"April will marry and so will Flavia," said John.

"Both will probably get engaged on the voyage out and then where will you be?"

"Alone," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply. "And you know, although it sounds a funny thing to say, I don't think it will be very different to what it always has been with me. Human beings always are alone. No one really understands what one feels and thinks and longs for. Do they?"

"They might," said John, and heaved a sigh of relief as the old waiter came triumphantly out of the spotless little kitchen at the back of the restaurant. That had been a near thing, he thought, as he shook some salt out of the queer little glass pot on to his chicken. Fancy if he had proposed then! At half-past one across a little table in a Soho restaurant. She would have refused him, of course, and quite rightly. He would have to be more circumspect until he had safely deposited her at Harrods' again.

And he was. John Maxwell was a man of the world and had plenty of things to talk about. Mrs. Metcalfe listened and tried to be really interested and could not be. She had hoped that he was going to be personal and help her with advice and talk about the girls. But he would not talk about anything except plays she hadn't seen, and things like the decadence of our modern art; the paganism, for instance, of that unpleasant Epstein idea of Night. Mercifully not the idea of anyone else, at least, no one that he had ever met, said John sardonically.

So lunch was, on the whole, not altogether a success. Mrs. Metcalfe felt depressed when at last she found

herself in her bedroom again. And the hat had made her head ache. Too tight. She took it off and threw it angrily on the bed. She was old enough to know better, she thought, leaning forward so that she could see herself more clearly in the dressing-table mirror, and noticing with a pang how dreadfully grey her hair was getting over her ears.

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CHAPTER VI

Soon there was only a week left before it was time for them to start for India. The heavy luggage was all packed and labelled and ready to go. One morning John Maxwell saw it all standing in the hall. Nine packages in all, he counted. And as he stood staring at it April came down the stairs and stood by his side. More and more she had begun to like this tall, distinguished-looking man who gazed so often and so long at her mother. Why didn't Madeline say something to her about it, thought April rather resentfully. She would understand so absolutely. This nice man could see what a dear Madeline really was. Like a nice understanding brother. And yet Madeline never mentioned him. It was odd. Very odd, thought April, who, however, kept her own counsel about it, never mentioning it to Flavia.

"Well, this looks like business." From his greater height John Maxwell looked down into April's beautiful little face. How odd that he had ever found it difficult to distinguish the sisters apart. They were not in the least alike really. At least not in spirit, which was the only thing that mattered, thought John, knowing that he ought to start off for the South Kensington Museum and yet hating the thought of it. Life was meant to be happy and alive in. All this grubbing about in the past. . . . Useless!

"Yes, we shall soon be gone now," said April, returning John's gaze with a look of complete confidence.

"Glad?"

"Madly, for some things. Not for others," returned April.

"Such as . . . ? " John smiled.

"I don't believe Mother wants to go," said April slowly.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, I can't quite explain it," said April.

"Try. Come in here, it's empty." John glanced through the glass door of the lounge. He put his hand on April's shoulder, pushing her in ahead of him. He had absolutely forgotten about the South Kensington Museum: if someone had suddenly rushed in and told him that it was on fire he felt that he would have been rather glad. He certainly would not have left the girl who stood beside him now, to go and help to put it out.

"Now then, tell me why you don't think your mother wants to go to India," said John. They were both sitting in low chairs close to the fire. It was beginning to get chilly, being nearly the end of September, and a fire was nice. That was why 129 Ferndale Road was nearly always full. Mrs. Rixon, who ran it, never grudged fires.

"Well, she hasn't got that sort of joyous look about her any more," said April confidentially. "I know Mother so well, you see. When we first got here she was just ordinarily cheerful. Then after about a week she got most frightfully cheerful, sort of shining through—I don't know if you understand what I mean. And now

for the last ten days she has got as if something inside her had gone out. As if a lamp that had been keeping her alive had gone out," said April, struggling to make herself intelligible to this kind man who sat listening to her so intently.

"I see." John sat back in his chair and then leant forward again. "I haven't really seen your mother to speak to for about ten days," he said; "she seems suddenly to be so busy."

"Oh, well then, perhaps that's it," said April brightly. "She misses you, I expect. That quite accounts for it. I noticed that you stared at her a good deal as if you wanted to say something and couldn't get the opportunity."

"Did you?" With difficulty John controlled his face. But in spite of himself the corners of his clean-shaven mouth twitched. This child was delicious; no wonder her mother thought so much of her.

"Make an opportunity to say it," said April soberly.

"Well, will you help me?" said John suddenly. "What does your mother like, for instance? Does she like pictures? I could take her to Burlington House to see the Italian Art. Or does she like the theatre? *Milestones* is on. She might enjoy that."

"She simply adores the theatre," said April eagerly. "Oh, do take her to *Milestones*, Mr. Maxwell. I know she would love that. Take her on Friday, because that is the day that Flavia and I have been invited down into the country for the night. We are going to stay with one of Flavia's friends and go to a dance. Do ask her for that night," said April, her delicate face flushing.

"Well, I think I will," said John slowly. "Is she in the hotel now?—because I might ask her if she is. I ought to book seats at once if I am to get good ones."

"Shall I go and find out? I am sure she is," said April excitedly.

"Do, will you?" said John, and as April bolted out of the lounge he got up and walked to the window. So his carefully-thought-out scheme of action had been a success after all. She did like him and had missed his society. And now his mind was made up. He would ask her on Friday evening to marry him, because they would have loads of time as the girls were going away for the night. She would accept him. He would make her accept him, thought John, clenching his hands in his pockets and then wheeling round because he heard the door of the lounge open and shut.

"April said that you wanted me," Mrs. Metcalfe's mouth was a little tremulous. How the light from the two huge windows must be showing up her wrinkles, she thought, trying to meet his eyes and not being able to because the look from them was so intent.

"Yes, I do." What an opportunity, thought John, staring at the lounge door and wondering what fool had conceived the idea of making it of glass. "I want you to come to the theatre one night," he said. "I was talking to April, and she tells me that she and her sister are going down into the country on Friday. How would Friday do for you?"

"Oh, I've packed all my nicest clothes!" The words escaped Mrs. Metcalfe in spite of herself.

"Never mind. I expect you've got something that

will do," smiled John. "I'll only wear a short coat to keep you in countenance."

"Oh, I should love to come," faltered Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Good. What would you like to see?"

"*Milestones*," said Mrs. Metcalfe promptly.

"So would I," said John. "I saw it years ago, but I believe it's better than ever now because of that. Nineteen-twelve fashions make us laugh just as much as the 1860 ones do. I'll get tickets, then, and we'll dine somewhere first, if you will."

"How heavenly," exclaimed Mrs. Metcalfe, forgetting instantly her misery and depression of the last week. She had thought that he had got tired of her and he hadn't. She had waked up so dreadfully early that morning and thought it all over, about how disgustingly selfish she was becoming and that the happiness of her children used to be enough, and it wasn't now. About how she had developed a dreadful clutching feeling that she wanted happiness of her very, very own. And now here it was! She stood and gazed up into the kind face that she knew by heart. One of his dark eyebrows was just an atom higher than the other. His mouth had a whimsical, amused look on it even when it wasn't smiling.

"Well, then we'll consider it settled," said John. Again he cursed the transparent door because if it hadn't been there he would have taken Mrs. Metcalfe in his arms and kissed her then. Kissed her, and then got her faltering confession that she loved him, and then rushed out and bought a special license and married her without telling those two pretty girls. And then

chucked his work at the South Kensington Museum and gone out for a jolly cold weather in India, which he already knew fairly well. And then he came down to earth again. He was a man of forty-five. When you are forty-five you stop to think, he reflected, taking hold of Mrs. Metcalfe's hand for no reason at all except that it looked soft and that he wanted to take hold of it.

"Good-bye then," he said and he gave it a little shake as an excuse for having taken hold of it, and walked out of the room. And like any stupid girl of twenty Mrs. Metcalfe rushed to the window directly he had disappeared and watched him after a second or two appear again and go down the steep stone steps. How tall he was and how enchantingly he put on his hat, she thought wildly. Oh, supposing he was run over! she thought breathlessly, watching him sauntering across the road and stopping and standing very still as a bus charged by him on both sides.

Ah! but he was still alive! Mrs. Metcalfe dodged back from the window as he reached the opposite kerb and stood for a moment glancing back at the house he had just left. Ah, there she was, watching him! John turned his steps and his face towards the South Kensington Museum and his heart sang foolishly.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN MAXWELL belonged to two clubs. One where you could take women and one where you couldn't. In the one where you could, the dining-rooms were soft with little tables with shaded rose-coloured lights on them. The tables were not too close together either. John had been in earlier that morning to choose one well away in a corner. Close, although not too close, to a gay little sparkling fire. He was also going to have a special dinner. He stood and chatted to the head steward, consulting him as to what he should have.

The head steward was helpful and delighted inwardly to think that Mr. Maxwell was at last bringing a lady to dine there. More than a couple of female relatives with this fine-looking gentleman had never been seen, meditated the head steward. And the ordinary dinner had been good enough for them, although Mr. Maxwell was always very particular about his wines. But to-night he was going to have champagne and a special dinner. "Being a lady, I doubt if she will appreciate anything too dry, Morton," he had said. "And a pint bottle I am afraid will be enough. But mind it's cold," and then John Maxwell had gone away.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Metcalfe, after seeing her two girls off at Waterloo, had rushed straight to Shaftesbury Avenue. So ashamed of herself that she dared hardly

think what she was doing, she had decided to buy herself a new dress. Up to the very last minute she had determined to wear the black one that she wore every night at the hotel. It was nice, and very becoming, but now that evening frocks were long it was not really long enough. Mrs. Metcalfe suffered tortures of indecision before she decided to buy herself a new one. The girls would wonder so dreadfully where she had got it from, and why. But Mrs. Metcalfe at last did not care. This was to be her evening and the evening of the man that she adored. She was going to look nice if she never again spent another penny on herself. The shop in Shaftesbury Avenue rose nobly to the occasion. Mrs. Metcalfe was always a success in shops because she was so humble and anxious to be helped. The beautifully-got-up lady who ran the shop scented romance and became very interested indeed. The result was charming and very inexpensive considering how nice it was. A little frock in panné ring velvet that clung where it ought to cling and flowed out where it ought to flow out. Patterned all over with little soft pale flowers. No sleeves, and that frightened Mrs. Metcalfe dreadfully until a darling little coat to match was produced. A little coat with a soft upstanding fur collar. Mrs. Metcalfe's eager little face peeped out of the collar like a soft little owl's face out of a hollow in a tree. The lady in the shop stood back a little way and was delighted. Women of forty were much more interesting to dress than girls of twenty, she decided. Especially when they had kept their figures as this one had done.

So that was all very delightful and Mrs. Metcalfe,

clutching the dainty flowered box that contained the garment, got on to a bus and went home again. She left it in her bedroom and then went out again to have a cheap lunch somewhere. Lunch in the hotel, and a very nice one at that, was three shillings.

After her extravagant morning one and sixpence for lunch, including a tip, was all that she could allow, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, wishing that she had decided to go into a Corner House while she was near one, and now knowing that she must content herself with an ordinary Lyons.

However, the lunch was very nice. Anything would have been nice with the glow of joys to come that was stowed away at the back of Mrs. Metcalfe's mind. Only the afternoon to get through, and then after a very early tea she could have a bath and begin to get ready. They were going to start from the hotel at half-past six, so as to have loads of time for dinner. "Don't have anything to eat for tea or you won't be able to manage dinner at seven," said John laughingly as he happened to meet Mrs. Metcalfe on the stairs that morning on his way to the Museum.

"No, I won't," said Mrs. Metcalfe solemnly. As she went on up the stairs to her room she wondered if all women at her age had the capacity for such extreme joy as she had. Surely those two lovely girls of hers whom she was just going to see off at Waterloo couldn't know this rapture of anticipation, this tingling excitement of something heavenly in store, that she had at the moment.

Although perhaps they could. Half an hour later

both came into her room carrying their neat little suit-cases with their faces all excitement and anticipation. Although April looked the happier, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, stopping to give a second glance at herself in the glass because Flavia had told her that her hat was just a little too far down over her eyes.

"It's made it just perfect for me, knowing that you are going to have a happy evening too," said April tenderly, waiting, however, until Flavia had gone on down the stairs, to say the words.

"Precious child," said Mrs. Metcalfe. And as she felt April's soft kiss on her face she wondered whether anything could quite equal the love that a mother felt for a child who really understood her. Yes it could, only in a different way, decided Mrs. Metcalfe, back in her bedroom again after seeing the girls off and buying the dress in Shaftesbury Avenue and having lunch at Lyons', and now preparing to have a lie down until four o'clock. The dress and little coat to match it hung triumphantly on a hanger in the pale September sunshine. Heavenly, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, getting on to the bed and eyeing it rapturously from there. The sun would take out the few creases that remained from its hasty journey in the flowered box. Now she must try to go to sleep, she thought, rolling resolutely on to her side and closing her eyes, and knowing that there was not the remotest chance of going to sleep because she was far too excited.

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CHAPTER VIII

JOHN MAXWELL had taken many more women out to dinner than the head steward at his Club thought he had. Only that they had not been the sort of women that he would take to his Club. He knew exactly how to make a woman feel happy and at her very best when she was taken out. When at last, at about three minutes before half-past six, Mrs. Metcalfe stood in the hall of 129 Ferndale Road he was also there ready and waiting for her.

"I'm early, I know," Mrs. Metcalfe began to speak before she had finished coming down the stairs. "But I was so dreadfully afraid that my clock might be wrong."

"You're not in the least early. This clock is always wrong," said John promptly and untruthfully. The large round clock that had kept perfect time for at least twenty years stared spikily at John as though it would gladly have stabbed him with the long hand that was pointing towards him and that registered exactly three minutes to the half hour.

"The car is here and waiting," he went on. For one ridiculous moment John had been so terribly afraid that it might not have been. He loved Mrs. Metcalfe's youthful eagerness and had a ridiculous longing that nothing should happen to distress it.

"A car! how lovely!" Mrs. Metcalfe really did look very nice. Her small face was sheltered and softened by the high enveloping collar of her fur coat. She had darkened her eyebrows a little and also her eyelashes. Both looked softer and more luxuriant because of it. She had added a little rouge to her rather pale face. This anxious making-up had taken more than half an hour. Mrs. Metcalfe had stared into her looking-glass until she felt as if her face belonged to somebody else. Too much make-up was so ghastly. But a little made you look nicer, especially if you were dining somewhere where the lights were not shaded. Men sometimes did not think about that. But she would not touch her lips. She had always hated that. Besides. . . . And then Mrs. Metcalfe crushed down the thought that would come, however much she tried not to let it. Of course, though, he never would. He wouldn't want to, to begin with.

"Yes, I always have a car when I go out for the evening like this. It makes it ever so much more comfortable," said John. By now they were going down the steps. The page-boy ran on ahead of them and excitedly wrenched open the nice shiny door of the Daimler. He knew Mr. Maxwell very well indeed; he gave him foreign postage stamps whenever he happened to have them.

"The Arts and Services Club," said John, standing on the pavement and speaking to the chauffeur. But he had taken quite a minute to settle Mrs. Metcalfe comfortably into her seat first. He knew exactly how to do it, too. Mrs. Metcalfe gave a little excited gasp as

he drew himself out again backwards and spoke to the chauffeur, and then got in again.

"Comfortable?" John was smiling. He looked very nice in his evening dress with the white silk scarf tucked round his neck. His thin black overcoat was just right. "I hope you don't mind me without a hat," he said.

"Oh no, I like it," said Mrs. Metcalfe. A child going to its first pantomime could not have been more excited than she was then. She stared out like a child as the car steered its smooth way along Ferndale Road and out into Queen's Gate. . . . Along past Harrods', Woolland's and Hyde Park Corner. Crowds of people getting in and out of omnibuses. Poor things, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, snuggled in her corner and knowing that when she got out of the car her dress would be right and that she wouldn't have to tug surreptitiously at it because it was too short somewhere, or anything like that.

"You know we really are rather early. I think we'll go for a little drive first," said John. He blew through the speaking-tube and the chauffeur slowed down and slanted his head a little to the left. He nodded twice at John's briefly spoken order and did an elaborate manoeuvre round the Royal Artillery Memorial outside St. George's Hospital. Then he slid into the Park with a deep melodious blast from his horn.

"We'll waste time by going round Regent's Park," said John. "At least, we won't waste it, because I've got something to say to you." During the ten minutes' drive from Ferndale Road John had been thinking very

hard. In a week from now Mrs. Metcalfe was sailing for India. In a little more than twelve hours from now her daughters would be back again. Conflicting claims were often very urgent with a woman of this type, especially when they clashed with her inclinations. He had better not waste any more time.

"Look here," he said, and he cleared his throat a little as he spoke. "I want to tell you something. Give me your nice little hand. No, don't give it to me, I can find it for myself," said John, slipping his hand under the soft plush rug.

"What . . . ?" Mrs. Metcalfe's voice failed in her throat.

"Why, I love you," said John. "Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous when I have known you for so short a time. But I suppose it is one of those cases when time doesn't matter. You've always belonged to me, I expect: at least, I feel as if you had. Well, what about it?" he ended tenderly, smiling at her look of alarm.

"I don't feel as if I . . ." Mrs. Metcalfe, her hand quivering in the strong one that held it, gasped.

"I know. I know it must be a fearful shock to you," said John suddenly. "How could it fail to be? You see, I've not led up to it at all: I thought it better not to, somehow."

"The girls . . ." quavered Mrs. Metcalfe.

"I'm not talking about the girls, I'm talking about you and me," said John quietly. "The girls will come presently: of course, they'll have to, I know that. But at the moment you and I are the more important. Do

you love me? If you don't, of course it's hopeless. But if you do. . . ."

"I do," said Mrs. Metcalfe instantly.

"Thank God for that!" said John soberly. Then after a little pause: "I thought it got dark earlier in September," he said discontentedly, and he turned from his quiet contemplation of Mrs. Metcalfe's illumined face to stare impatiently out of the window.

"No, not till about seven," said Mrs. Metcalfe tremulously.

"Bother!" said John. And then he turned to her. "Now we can," he said. "It's deserted here, thank goodness."

"Oh no, wait!" gasped Mrs. Metcalfe. Her face was flushing and paling. "I've always felt there was something so desperate about a kiss," she said. "I can't—yet."

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry," John could have kicked himself for his crude stupidity.

"No, I'm so frightfully stupid," said Mrs. Metcalfe, her hand trembling in his.

"You're not in the least stupid. I am," said John. He blew through the speaking-tube again. The chauffeur turned round and nodded, then headed for the Club.

"We'll have a lovely dinner," he said. "And not speak of this again, if you'd rather not, until we're on our way home. I brought you out to enjoy yourself, I'm not going to spoil it all for you by worrying you. Better?"

"I never was anything but quite well and blissfully

happy," said Mrs. Metcalfe frankly. "It's because of that. It's—it's too much, somehow. It's not that I don't want you to kiss me," stammered Mrs. Metcalfe. "It's only that I feel when you do I shall . . ."

"I know, and thank God you do feel like that," said John abruptly. "I understand absolutely. And now here we are." He drew her hand out from under the rug. "If I kissed this you wouldn't go absolutely off the deep end, would you?" he twinkled. He held her hand a little below his mouth.

"Someone in that omnibus will see," said Mrs. Metcalfe tremulously.

"Let them: it will do them good," said John mischievously. He lifted her prisoned hand to his mouth and turning it so that the soft palm curved upwards he buried his lips for a moment in it. And then he sighed and let it go again. "The Club," he said. "Just in time."

"Oh!" Mrs. Metcalfe had shrunk further back into her corner and was staring at him with eyes that were suddenly very bright indeed.

"I won't promise to behave quite so well on my way back from the theatre," said John briefly, as the car slid into the kerb and the minute page-boy came dashing down the Club steps.

"No?" and then Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly became speechless. She could not have said anything else if she had had to do so. And she hadn't. John was already helping her out of the car and shepherding her up the steps with a careful hand on her arm. He showed her where to go and leave her coat, handing her over to another chubby page-boy for her final directions. And

then he went off himself to hang up his own coat and brush his hair. It needed it, surely, thought John, passing a quick hand over the shining neatness of his head and then glancing at himself in the glass and seeing that it didn't need it after all.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. METCALFE had a delicate and sensitive conscience and she knew that stalls at the theatre nowadays were expensive things. She tried therefore to give her attention to what was going on on the stage. But she couldn't. She was only conscious of the man sitting beside her. The white blur of his shirt-front. The thick white line that his collar drew against the darker texture of his neck. His hands: without moving her head at all she could see them clasped on his crossed knees. If only he would take hold of her hand with one of them. She tried to subdue her thoughts and could not. Everyone around her was staring at the stage and so would she. She gripped her hands on the velvet arm of her seat and tried to open her eyes wider, so that she could take it all in more. Hopeless: she could only think more acutely of the man sitting beside her. Sitting so still. What was he thinking about? Was he thinking about her? Was he perhaps thinking that he wished he had not said what he had so hurriedly in the car? wondered Mrs. Metcalfe, in a sudden agony of fear.

But John, sitting with one long leg crossed over the other, was wondering how he was going to keep up his attitude of calm middle-aged placidity when he had got Mrs. Metcalfe alone with him in the car going

home. It had been difficult enough at dinner. One little incident had showed him how difficult. Everything had been just right. The dinner was excellent, and the table cosily close to the fire and daintily shaded. Mrs. Metcalfe had sipped at the champagne as if she was frightened of it, and had then liked it and smiled down into her brimming glass. And then after the entrée she had given a little gasp. "Oh, it's hot," she said.

"Oh! Now then what can we do?" John was instantly the attentive host. He glanced round to see if they could change their table, but the room had filled up and they couldn't. After all he had put her close to the fire because he had thought she would like it. "I'm sorry." He looked penitently across the table.

"No, no. I think . . ." and then Mrs. Metcalfe had hesitated.

"Doesn't the saucy little coat come off?" said John, a sudden idea striking him. He suddenly noticed that Mrs. Metcalfe was rather wrapped up. She looked perfectly delicious, but still——

"It does. But I don't know . . ." Mrs. Metcalfe looked hopelessly across the table.

"Take it off," said John firmly. He got up and walked round the table. Mrs. Metcalfe yielded with shrugging shoulders, and the little velvet coat was in his hands. It left a very beautiful neck and arms uncovered. John's eyes dwelt for one fleeting second on them and then he walked back to his place carrying the little coat.

"It will be perfectly safe here," he said, hanging it

up on a convenient brass hook above his chair. He did not look at Mrs. Metcalfe, but his thoughts were tender. What sort of a life had she led that her innocent shyness had been so exquisitely preserved? he wondered, glancing casually at her across the table and asking her if she noticed how the room had filled up since their arrival a short half-hour before.

"Yes, hasn't it?" Mrs. Metcalfe's breath came rather flutteringly. But she had soon forgotten about her alarming scarcity of clothing. John meant that she should. Everything ended off delightfully. They got to the theatre at exactly the right moment and had beautiful seats. And now they sat in these seats and thought of nothing but each other. John was wondering whether he should slip his hand down between the two seats and take hold of hers. What would she do? Like all passionate men, he was deeply sensitive. He did not want to risk a rebuff, and for that reason he had not attempted to kiss her as they drove from the Club to the theatre. However, perhaps—— He unclasped his hands, and so that there should be no doubt what he meant to do he shot a quick glance to where the hand nearest to him was, and then took it in a strong warm clasp. Warm: yes, because her small soft hand was cold as ice. He gathered it more closely into his.

"Oh!" he could feel Mrs. Metcalfe's little gasp although she made no sound. Her thoughts were incoherent. Had he known that in some strange way she had been struggling to get closer to him? Not exactly in body, but in spirit. Such a childish thing,

really, this craving to take hold of somebody's hand. And yet, the most perfect thing, really. The shelter of it! Now she could enjoy the play. Why did stupid people have these arms between the seats, though? To have nestled up closer to him! What unutterable rapture that would have been. However—Mrs. Metcalfe tried to steady her thoughts. After all she was forty-three, she told herself incoherently. However, age makes very little difference to one's feelings, and she realized it more an hour or so later. They got out of the theatre at twenty minutes past eleven. If they were back at the hotel at half-past twelve it would do perfectly well, thought John, leaving Mrs. Metcalfe in the foyer of the Criterion and strolling round to where the chauffeur had told him he would be pretty certain to be parked. He was. John gave him a ten-shilling note and told him to get them back to 129 Ferndale Road by half-past twelve. The chauffeur touched his cap respectfully and said, "Thank you very much, sir," and that was all settled very comfortably.

But John was tender as well as passionate. The woman that he held in his arms was sensitive in her surrender to his kisses. The lips under his were cold.

"Is it wrong?" she gasped.

"Wrong? No, why should it be wrong?" said John. He pressed her head a little closer into his coat. "Look here, we've got to talk," he said. "We've got so desperately little time left to do it—because you'll be gone in a week. It's awful. I suppose you must go."

"What do you think about it?" breathed Mrs.

Metcalf, lifting her face so that she could see his mouth.

"I think that I don't want you to go," said John simply, and he kissed her again.

"Well, then . . ."

"Yes, but we must look at the thing all round," said John. The car stole softly round the outer circle of Regent's Park. He pressed her closer to him. "There is nothing more that I want than to have you for my wife," he said. "You know that. But the relation of stepfather to two girls of the age of yours is a difficult matter. They would resent it dreadfully and quite naturally. That would make you wretched. It would," said John gently, as Mrs. Metcalfe made a little sound of protest; "you don't think it would now, but I know that it would. Therefore it would be much better if the girls could marry first. They will marry if you take them out to India. Therefore I think you will have to take them," said John finally.

"Oh, but how shall I live without you?" gasped Mrs. Metcalfe.

"How shall *I* live without *you*?" said John ruefully. "That's more to the point. But we shall just have to set our teeth and make up our minds to it. If it becomes unbearable and you want me too badly out in India I will chuck up my job and come out to you. I've got enough for you and me to live on without my work at the Museum. I've been to India too, so I know all about that. How does that please you?" said John, looking down at the little pale face turned up to his.

"Nothing pleases me but to be with you always," breathed Mrs. Metcalfe, wondering what had happened to her love for her two children. It was there still, it must be there. But where was it? This! . . . Why, this was like heaven, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, thinking with a sort of mild wonder of Paul and realizing that she had actually been married to him.

"You darling," said John quietly. He kissed her again speechlessly. Anyhow, for the week that was left he was going to see as much of her as he could, he resolved. April would understand, and after her first natural grief that her mother was hers no longer she would be unselfish enough to rejoice in her happiness. But Flavia wouldn't. Flavia would be spiteful, thought John, who was a good judge of character and who had never cared for Flavia.

"Shall we tell the girls?" asked Mrs. Metcalfe, letting her hand stray upwards so that it touched John's chin . . . then feeling how forward it was of her and hurriedly bringing it down again.

"No," said John after an instant's hurried thought. He caught her wandering hand and held it to his mouth. "It's better not, I think," he said. "After all, we're not children: we haven't to ask anyone's approval. But it's much better not to invite disapproval. It will only make you miserable, and I don't want anything to do with me to make you miserable. I want to bring only happiness into your life," said John gently.

"I wasn't alive at all until you told me that you loved me," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and in the darkness a soft happy tear stole down her pale face.

PART II

CHAPTER X

GOING to India is very exciting. Especially in one of the new P. and O. liners. Ten days later the girls were in ecstasies over their accommodation. One very large roomy cabin for both of them and a smaller single berth cabin for their mother a little further down the corridor.

"Do you like it, darling?" April had left Flavia unpacking, and had dashed along to see if her mother was all right.

"Very much indeed," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she spoke the truth. She had expected to feel lost and in despair at leaving John. But his love was something so profound that she felt it still encircling her. He had transformed her life. Nothing else really mattered. Mrs. Metcalfe was astounded to find that this was so. She had proved it. The night before they had started Flavia had been difficult and selfish over something. Formerly that had distressed Mrs. Metcalfe, and had made her begin to think that life with the two girls together might be difficult and not too satisfactory. And now it fell from her like a discarded garment. In thought she fled to her lover. Flavia didn't exist. Flavia, scowling at her mother, wondered

what had happened to her. Because she still looked serene although Flavia still scowled.

So now she was able to bustle excitedly round her cabin and welcome April with a beaming smile. John had not seen her off. They had said their farewell the night before: a perfect one. The girls had gone to bed, and so was Mrs. Metcalfe supposed to have gone to bed. But she hadn't. John had ordered a car for eleven o'clock that night and they had gone out to supper at the Carlton and then for a long, long drive. Mrs. Rixon, who had guessed what had happened to her distinguished client and the pretty little mother of the two girls, gave John a latchkey with a beaming smile. They got back to the hotel at two o'clock in the morning and let themselves in with the key and kissed again outside John's bedroom door. And as he kissed her he sighed. "What rubbish it all is!" he whispered. "And yet, I suppose we're right. After all, it's not for long, is it?"

"No," said Mrs. Metcalfe, hiding her burning face on her lover's heart and wishing, oh so desperately, that he—— And then, when she had got up to her own room she knew that she didn't wish it really. Because God had ordained marriage because He knew that there were lots of things that women loved that they couldn't have without it. Children, for instance; no one had any right to bring into the world anything that might be wretched because it hadn't been born properly. Not that she would be likely to have any more children—at least, she devoutly hoped she wouldn't, for his sake, because he probably wouldn't

want any. But there were other things. Simple little homely things that you couldn't have if you were bothering about whether people saw you or not. No, it was better as it was, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling more and more certain of it as she thought how soon six months would pass and how if she had anything at all on her conscience it might make her feel uncomfortable with April. And now she beamed at April. "Have you seen anyone that you think looks nice yet?" she asked.

"Yes, a man," said April promptly. "I passed him in the corridor as I came to see you just now. Tall and fair, with a very short moustache cropped right away from his mouth."

"Really! I wonder who it is," said Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling inwardly very much astonished. April, who to her knowledge had never taken the remotest notice of a man before! Flavia had remarked on it on their return from their expedition into the country for the dance. "April never made the faintest attempt to make herself attractive to anyone," she declared.

"I did," said April, flushing.

"Not to any man," retorted Flavia, who had had quite a promising flirtation with the younger brother of her friend. He was down from Cambridge and Flavia had liked him.

"No, well—I don't care about men," said April. And Mrs. Metcalfe had laughed and patted her child's face. But here was April eagerly speaking about a man, and that when she had only been on the ship for about an hour and a half. Mrs. Metcalfe felt suddenly

very eager indeed to see this man. "I'm tired of unpacking," she said suddenly. "Let us go for a little tour of exploration, shall we, darling?"

"Yes, let's," said April excitedly. They set forth together. At first it was difficult: so many flights of stairs and long white-painted corridors with green serge curtains blowing in the open doors of the cabins. But after a while they got the geography rather clearer. They came out into a wide open space with a sort of very aristocratic kiosk standing in the middle of it. People were standing round the kiosk. Letters and telegrams. Mrs. Metcalfe's heart suddenly gave a little leap. It was worth asking, anyhow.

"Mrs. Metcalfe?" said the man in uniform behind the counter in an enquiring voice.

"Yes."

"Telegram," said the man briefly and handed it to her.

"Oh, how exciting!" said April joyously. "Who's it from? Open it, Mother."

Mrs. Metcalfe opened it. A very short telegram: "A happy voyage and a happier return. John."

"Who's it from?" repeated April, glancing up into her mother's face and then feeling that she knew already. Of course, Madeline could never hide things. Should she pretend that she didn't understand, until her mother told her herself? Everything round April suddenly seemed to blur a little. She no longer came first with this beloved mother of hers. Then blindly she felt that she hated the tall man, whom up to that moment she had rather liked.

"It's from Mr. Maxwell," said Madeline, and she avoided April's eyes.

"Oh." April took a few steps towards the wide staircase. "Let's go up here," she said, "it leads up on to the main deck. Flavia and I went as soon as we got on board."

"Yes, let's." Mrs. Metcalfe crushed up the telegram and put it into the pocket of her cardigan. She walked beside April and wondered what was going on in her mind. And yet, did it matter? John loved her, and was thinking of her now. The two walked out on to the main deck.

"There he is, Mother." April had forgotten about the telegram. She fell shyly back and tugged at her mother's coat like a child.

"Where, darling?"

"There. Oh, let's get away. He might see us."

"But he has seen us," said Mrs. Metcalfe very softly. "Don't, April, it would look foolish." She stood still and pretended not to be looking at the tall young man who was coming quickly across the deck. He had been standing and talking to two other men, but had instantly stopped when he caught sight of April and her mother. A relation of this exquisite little creature whom he had seen in the downstairs corridor. It would be easy enough to get to know them now. But not so easy when they had started and people had begun to pair off. Major Carew had made many voyages to the East.

"Well, I hope you've found everything very comfortable in your cabin." Major Carew was well over

thirty and perfectly at his ease. He smiled delightfully at April. "I met this young lady wandering about as if she didn't know what she was going to do next," he said, "so I gathered that it was her first voyage."

"Oh yes, it is. It's the first voyage for all of us," smiled Mrs. Metcalfe. "I'm April's mother. We're terribly excited about it all."

"Really? How nice. So was I when I went out first," said Major Carew. "Now I'm afraid I'm terribly blasé." His eyes were on April.

"How can you be blasé? It's madly exciting," beamed April. Her blue eyes were confidently lifted to the bronzed face that looked down at her.

"Well, you see, this is my seventh voyage," said Major Carew. "I must say that this one promises to be a little more exciting, because I've generally had the misfortune to be travelling in a trooper."

"Oh, are you a soldier?" said April naïvely.

"For my sins, yes," said Major Carew. "A Sapper. Your mother will tell you what that is, Miss . . ."

"Metcalfe," supplied Mrs. Metcalfe, gazing at Major Carew as if by staring at him hard enough she could tell whether he was married or not.

"Don't you like being a Sapper?" said April, puzzled.

"Oh yes, I like it. It's all right for a man like me who has no ties," returned Major Carew cheerfully. His keen grey eyes were frightfully amused at Miss Metcalfe's mother. Like a nice soft bird crouching over her chickens and making a little squawk when some large depredating bird flew over the run, he thought, wanting to laugh.

"Oh," and then Mrs. Metcalfe felt the telegram crunching in her pocket and suddenly wondered whether there was time to send an answer to it. "Could I send an answer to a telegram?" she asked Major Carew abruptly.

"If you do it at once, yes," said Major Carew, glancing down at his wrist-watch. "We don't leave until half-past one."

"Wait for me here, darling, will you?" said Mrs. Metcalfe, and without waiting she turned and ran like a girl down the deck.

"Oh," said April softly and explosively.

"Come for a turn," said Major Carew. They walked together down the deck. The two men who had been with him until April and her mother appeared looked after them and then smiled at one another. And then like men they talked about something else. Not so the women. One of them knew Major Carew already and had been delighted to find that he was on board. To have had a really exciting flirtation with him would have been fun, thought Mrs. Payne discontentedly, dragging her deck-chair crossly a little further back. Young girls were maddening on voyages when they were as pretty as that. They ought to have a deck for themselves, thought Mrs. Payne, who really was a nice woman, only she had just left two children at home and was going out to rejoin a husband whom she had never really cared about.

Meanwhile April trod on air. Major Carew seemed in some strange way to fill up a bit of her that had never been filled up before. She could think of lots of

things to say to him that she had never thought of saying to anyone before, either. All the extraordinary things, like lascars in little scarlet twisted caps and blue linen suits swarming about the rails and tugging at ropes, passed her by. The smart deck steward, politely concerned with tiresome people's lost deck-chairs, glanced at April and Major Carew, and touched his peaked cap respectfully to the latter. "Do you know him?" asked April.

"I went home with him last time," said Major Carew; April's spontaneity intrigued him vastly. Gad, and she was pretty! And the mother was charming, too. Was there a father? he wondered.

"You see, Mother has a brother who is a Collector at Wandara," said April, answering Major Carew's unspoken question. "So Flavia and Mother and I are going out to stay with him for the winter."

"Flavia?"

"Yes, she's my twin sister," said April. "At first I don't expect you'll be able to tell us apart."

"I shall," said Major Carew meaningly. And Something far away and hidden and watching chuckled at this careless assertion.

"Please don't think I'm rude when I say that I don't think you will," said April earnestly. "We're really very much alike until you get to know us well."

"We'll see," said Major Carew. And then he suddenly stopped and stared very hard. "Jove, you're right," he said. "That must be she: with your mother."

"Yes," said April, also stopping and staring. And for the first time in her life she wished that her mother

and Flavia were somewhere else. Somehow, for her they had ceased to exist since she had begun to talk to this man. He was so . . .

"Hallo! has April got to know someone already?" Flavia was crinkling up her eyes.

"Yes, a Major Carew. At least, I think that must be his name. There are some telegrams for him on the board and I feel sure they are for him, somehow," said Mrs. Metcalfe. Childishly she was reproaching herself for having come up the particular flight of steps that she had. She wanted April to get to know this delightful man before Flavia came on the scene. She knew Flavia so well. April would have no chance. . . .

"I should like to know him too," said Flavia promptly

"Well . . ." And then the question was settled by Major Carew himself. He pretended not to see Flavia and her mother and swung round, beginning to walk the other way. April turned too, but she was alarmed. Flavia would think that she had done it on purpose.

"I wonder if there are any telegrams for me. Let's go and see." For some inscrutable reason Major Carew didn't want to let April go.

"Oh yes," said April. The word "telegram" brought all her disquiet back again. How she would love to tell this tall understanding man all about her mother and Mr. Maxwell and ask him what he thought about it. Perhaps she would be able to one day, thought April, feeling his touch on her arm as he led her round to the companion doorway and wondering why an odd little shiver ran all through her as he did so.

"There are some!" said Major Carew triumphantly

as they came down the wide stairs and stood before the notice board. "Three." He took them off and touched April's arm again.

"Come and sit down here while I read them," he said, and he drew April along with him.

And ten minutes later Flavia found them there. Talking hard. April more animated than she had ever seen her. Flavia felt cross. She was the eldest, too, and although people had stared at her a lot no one had spoken to her yet. She walked up to April and said her name.

And that was the end of the delightful talk. Major Carew got up instantly on to his feet and April rather awkwardly introduced Flavia to him. But she did it the wrong way round, as Flavia told her sharply when the two girls found themselves in their cabin again.

"Did I? Does it matter?" asked April humbly.

"Of course. It's rude to the woman to introduce her to the man. You introduce the man to her," said Flavia grandly. "However, it doesn't matter as long as we know each other. I wonder if he dances. What enchanting grey eyes he has. However did you get to know him?"

"I don't know," said April drearily. She went to the porthole and stared out of it. Tilbury looked dark and dreary and it had begun to rain. Tugs fussed round them and made loud raucous noises from their funnels. There was a noise everywhere, thought April, turning and staring round the cabin and thinking how small it was for three weeks and for two people. And Flavia had already appropriated two of her pegs.

"Anyhow, I know him now," said Flavia complacently.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was a great deal of the child about Mrs. Metcalfe. When Flavia came along just before dinner that night and told her that April didn't feel well she could have cried and beaten her head against the shining white-painted walls of her cabin. Her little girl a bad sailor and Flavia was a good one. What chance had she? She got a wild feeling that she would like to rush round and seek out Major Carew in his cabin and tell him to wait until April was better. That she was the nicer: far the nicer. But that Flavia was the cleverer: much the cleverer. "Oh, poor little darling!" she exclaimed.

"She's already been ill once. I rather loathe it in such a small space," said Flavia unfeelingly.

"There's no need for you to have it. You shall move in here and I will go and sleep with April," said Mrs. Metcalfe instantly. "We needn't move anything. We can undress in our own cabins and then change round. And the same thing in the morning. I'll come back in here after I've had my early tea."

"Don't you mind, darling?" said Flavia, looking instantly much more cheerful.

"Not a bit. I should hate not to be with her if she feels ill," said Mrs. Metcalfe, looking at Flavia and thinking how lovely she was.

"This is one of the Shaftesbury Avenue things. How do you think it looks?" asked Flavia complacently.

"Charming," said Mrs. Metcalfe truthfully. "It suits you, Flavia."

"I rather like the feeling of this old ship heaving up and down," said Flavia, stretching her rounded arms above her head and chuckling.

"So do I, mercifully," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "You inherit that from me. I'm a frightfully good sailor. Daddy was a very bad one," said Mrs. Metcalfe, thinking of a disastrous holiday that they had once had when they had both gone on a pleasure yacht from Paignton to Dawlish as a great treat.

"Well, I think I'll go upstairs," said Flavia.

"Yes, do. I'll come up when I'm ready. Take your coat, though: you'll need it," said Mrs. Metcalfe, watching Flavia go out through the green curtain and wondering why there were some things that were so frightfully important and yet you could not say them. To implore Flavia to leave April the joy of her little conquest. Nothing in it probably, but there might be. April found it so difficult to get to know people, and yet there had been something in her simple turning to Major Carew that had been like the instinctive turning of a flower to the sun. He was a gentleman and a bachelor: all so just right, thought Mrs. Metcalfe hopelessly. And now . . . She wound her flowered-silk shawl skilfully round her shoulders and went along the corridor to her daughter's cabin.

"Madeline, I feel so frightfully ill. I've been ill once, I couldn't help it, and Flavia says it's so disgusting,"

wept April. She began to cry directly she saw her mother come in through the curtain.

"Precious, it's not a bit disgusting," Mrs. Metcalfe knelt down by the low berth and took April in her arms. "There, here's the stewardess," she said cheerfully, as a neat, white-capped woman in a blue dress and spotless apron peeped round the curtain.

"Eh, she'll soon be all right," Mrs. Bruce was Scotch. "I've been looking after her, Madam. She's a wise little girl to get away with it as she has done. That's the way to get well quickly, Madam"; and Mrs. Bruce, who had ten cabins full of despairing women to look after, bustled away.

"There you see, sweetheart," comforted Mrs. Metcalfe, her face in April's soft neck. No, not even John could take the place of this beloved child of hers. Something living that tugged at her heartstrings and would not be denied.

"Now you've come I don't feel so awful," whispered April.

"I won't go up to dinner if you'd rather not," said Mrs. Metcalfe passionately.

"No, I want you to. I don't want you to be hungry, darling," said April softly.

"I'm going to sleep here. I've told Flavia," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "Then if you feel ill in the night you've only just got to say my name in the very softest voice and I shall wake up."

"Oh joy!" said April quietly. "How long will it go on heaving about like this?" she asked.

"Not long," said Mrs. Metcalfe cheerfully. "We're

well out in the Channel now, you see. That's what makes it so rough."

"What about the Bay of Biscay?" said April with a little shudder.

"Sometimes it's quite calm," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Oh, I hope it will be," said April faintly. "Flavia said that it's sometimes frightful there."

"Flavia doesn't know everything," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and felt ashamed of herself.

"No," said April. And then a sudden vision of her sister walking up and down the deck with the man that she had liked so awfully, so frightfully, came over her, and she turned on her pillow and the tears ran out again under her soft eyelids.

"What is it, my precious?" asked Mrs. Metcalfe again. Although she knew that April would not tell her. Also she knew already. Why did she ask?

"Nothing," said April. "Only that I feel ill. That's all," and she groped under the pillow for her handkerchief.

CHAPTER XII

THE Bay of Biscay lived up to its worst traditions. So did the coast of Portugal. Half the passengers were prostrate. Flavia, young and joyous and flushed with the excitement of it all, walked up and down the deck with her face peeping like a beautiful flower out of the high protecting collar of her moleskin coat, and Major Carew walked beside her. She stood and laughed as the great curved bow of the huge liner raised itself defiantly over the terrific seas and then plunged again so that the loose deck-chairs on the wet deserted decks slid dejectedly into convenient corners and remained there. The lascars, like dark chattering monkeys, swarmed about and tightened the thin ropes of the rolled-up awnings.

"It's an astounding thing to think that we can ever want awnings," said Major Carew, taking his pipe out of his mouth to speak to Flavia. He looked very nice in a dark blue Burberry and a tweed cap dragged down low over his eyes.

"Shall we want them? When?" asked Flavia. She suddenly clutched at his arm as the ship gave an unexpected roll.

"Probably when we leave Gibraltar," said Major Carew. He steadied Flavia, and his pulses beat a little faster as he felt her soft weight against him.

"Oh! But I love this, don't you?" laughed Flavia, who had never felt happier in her life. Only one other girl in the first-class saloon was well and she was engaged to someone in India, and did nothing but sit with her mother in the oak-panelled drawing-room and knit. Flavia could have had every young man at her heels had she wanted to, but she didn't. Major Carew fired her imagination. She liked the way his deep grey eyes stared at her. She liked to feel that he was obviously getting keen on her. She thought, with a thrill of her pulses, of the time, probably not so far distant, when he would want to kiss her and when they could spend delightful evenings in the stern, all in the dark. Directly it began to be hot she would get out all her new evening dresses. Now she kept to one: a pretty one, certainly, but there were prettier ones in store, thought Flavia, feeling a rush of something that was almost greater than excitement. This was living! How had she endured that life stuck away in Devonshire? And that stupid dance where that boy from Cambridge had seemed to like her. Why here she was surrounded by men. All well bred. All with nice teeth and delightful manners. And all obviously delighted if she took any notice of them. It was heaven, thought Flavia, pretending not to see that her mother had just looked out through the open companion door and then instantly drawn back again.

"How's the twin sister?" asked Major Carew, who until that moment had almost forgotten April.

"Oh, she's better," said Flavia carelessly. "At least

I really see very little of her. Mother sleeps in her cabin now in case she wants anything in the night."

"I see," said Major Carew, wondering if Flavia was selfish, and then, at the quick flash of her curly yellow head close to his shoulder, feeling that he didn't care if she was.

"I've always rather felt, only I wouldn't say it to anyone who I didn't think would understand, that I'm left out of things," said Flavia slowly. "Mother and April are so awfully fond of one another. I'm always out of it somehow."

"Are you?"

"Yes, don't you know how one feels if there are three people?" said Flavia. "As if you must make yourself scarce in case you are interrupting anything."

"Poor little girl!" said Major Carew, and he took his pipe out of his mouth and frowned down into the bowl of it.

"Don't think I'm complaining, will you? because that's so horrid," said Flavia wistfully.

"Rather not," said Major Carew quickly. And then, because his manners were excellent and he was really a very nice man, he left Flavia and went quickly up the deck to where a very plain woman like a horse was trying to disentangle her deck-chair from a collection of others.

"Oh, don't bother," said Miss Baker. Her pale face looked out from an unbecoming wisp of fawn chiffon. It kept her thin hair in place. This was the first time she had ever travelled first-class and she had only done it because her brother had insisted because she

was such an appalling sailor. He had paid the extra few pounds; a few pounds only, because she was travelling first-class B.

"It is no bother," said Major Carew, who, ever since he had been a boy in his teens, had had a very tender sympathy with unprepossessing women. They missed every mortal thing that made life the gorgeous thing it was, he thought, as he tugged at the recalcitrant deck-hair.

"Thank you so very much." Miss Baker wore coloured glasses and the tip of her rather thin nose was pink. But she had a very nice smile, thought Major Carew, who saw it for a brief instant as Miss Baker half sat and half fell into her chair.

"Have you a rug?" he asked kindly.

"No," said Miss Baker awkwardly. "At least, I have one, but I left it in my berth."

"I've got mine handy," said Major Carew. "My cabin's just here." In spite of Miss Baker's agonized expostulations he went a few steps down the deck, vanished and then reappeared. "I've got a deck cabin, you see," he said as he arranged the tartan rug carefully over Miss Baker's thin limbs. "So it was no trouble at all."

"It is too kind of you," said Miss Baker feebly. But the air was already doing her good. Desperately she felt that if she remained any longer in company with the two despairing fellow-missionaries down below she would die. Now this was better. She smiled again.

"Better?" enquired Major Carew, wondering where

Flavia had gone. She was no longer standing where he had left her, so much he could see.

"Much," said Miss Baker, smiling again. And the square strong teeth looked odd in the pinched face.

"Good. Then I'll get along," said Major Carew, and he turned to walk down the deck. And Miss Baker followed him with her eyes. That was a really kind man, she thought. Like men ought to be and generally weren't. She wondered who the beautiful girl who was with him was. In any event she was fortunate to have a man like that to take any notice of her. Miss Baker heaved a rather long sigh and shut her eyes. Thank Heaven she was out of that awful cabin! And the nice stewardess had told her that the next day but one they would be at Gibraltar. Round the corner, away from this fiendish coast of Portugal, thought Miss Baker, who before she had begun to travel had thought that Portugal was a nice place where the sea broke softly and bluely on sandy shores. Now she knew that it was a place where furious seas grasped huge liners in their white jaws and dragged them down and then blew them up again, thought Miss Baker, shutting her eyes and keeping them shut as the bows of the ship rose in the air and then sank again as if they sank for the last time.

But the weather was getting better. Much better, reported Major Carew when at last he found Flavia again. He had been delayed on his way by the First Officer, who recognized him from a former voyage. "It's calming down," the tall man in the peaked cap had vouchsafed. "I'll tell you, Major, even though

you may not want to know, because you haven't asked me!"

"I know better!" laughed Major Carew, who hadn't wanted to stop and talk at all but who had done so out of politeness.

"How long you've been," pouted Flavia when at last he came up with her. "Who was the lady whose deck-chair you helped to find?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea," said Major Carew. "A missionary, I should think, by the look of her."

"Are they all as plain as that?" demanded Flavia, feeling the wonderful sensation of power sweep over her again as Major Carew's keen gaze dwelt lingeringly on her upturned face.

"Most of them," admitted Major Carew briefly, although in fact he hardly heard what Flavia said. What a fool he was making of himself, he thought quickly. But this girl drove him mad. Why was it? He cleared his throat abruptly and fumbled in his pocket for his tobacco pouch.

"Why, you've only just filled yourself a pipe?" chattered Flavia.

"I know. But I let it go out," said Major Carew.

"Why? For fear that you would make the missionary lady feel ill again?" asked Flavia mockingly.

"Partly," said Major Carew and wished that he had the sense to go away now, to settle himself in the smoking-room well away from this exquisite girl and her undoubtedly profound fascination for him.

CHAPTER XIII

FLAVIA made the most of her opportunities. By the time that the great liner came to anchor in Gibraltar harbour and April crept up on deck looking very pale and a good deal thinner, Major Carew had almost forgotten that she existed. But he recognized her, although with a little shock. Gad, and he had thought that the sisters were alike!

"I say, you've had a wretched time!" he came quickly across the deck to meet her. April looked up at him and her face flushed crimson.

"Yes, but I'm all right now," she said quickly. April was ashamed of having been ill for so long. Seasickness was a humiliation, she had decided, although Madeline, with her arms round her, had told her that it wasn't and that Nelson himself was a very bad sailor.

"Let me get out your chair for you," said Major Carew. Flavia had gone to have her hair cut. She had left him with a backward glance that had brought the blood to his bronzed face. She knew her power over him and used it flagrantly. He would very soon be forced to do what he had always sworn he wouldn't do, thought Major Carew grimly—namely, propose to a girl on a voyage.

"Oh no, I'd rather walk about," said April joyfully.

Already the colour was beginning to come back to her face. She stared up at the great Rock and thrilled at the sight of it. She leaned her arms on the white rail and watched the multitude of boats and little tugs fussing about the harbour. Mrs. Metcalfe, putting her head through the companion door, drew it back as quickly as she had put it out. He had not forgotten her then: perhaps Flavia had not appropriated him as completely as Mrs. Metcalfe feared.

"It's jolly, isn't it?" Major Carew lounging with his long back against the rail smiled over April's head. Her voice reminded him of Flavia's. The two were alike, more alike than he had thought.

"Yes, heavenly," said April happily. "Do you think it's going to be rough again?"

"No," said Major Carew reassuringly. "Not now. We might get a slight tossing in the Gulf of Lions, but you won't feel it after what we've been through."

"Joy," said April briefly. Her heart sang and she thought how happy she was. Pretending that she was looking through the rail down into the water, she was really looking at the strong brown hand that hung down by his side. Innocently she let her eyes wander up until they reached his face. He felt her gaze and met it.

"A penny," he said laughingly, more for something to say than anything else.

"I was thinking how nice you were," said April simply.

"I say; how ripping of you," said Major Carew quickly. But he wondered. No, the sisters were not

alike, he thought. Why was Flavia so much the more attractive? Because she had much more of the primeval Eve in her. Ah! his gaze wandered away over April's head.

"Does anybody ever go on shore?" asked April, her soft elbows on the white rail and her hands shading her face.

"Often," said Major Carew, and he took a step forward.

"Oh, it must be fun. Have you ever been?" asked April, who had not heard him move away. She waited a second or two and then repeated her question, taking her hands down from her face.

But he was not there! How very odd, thought April. And then she saw him. He was walking down the deck with his back to her. Flavia was with him. But he had gone without saying anything. But . . . April's eyes were suddenly puzzled.

"Well, my sweet, how do you feel?" Mrs. Metcalfe, from the music-room window, had been watching April and Major Carew. She simply could not help it. And now she was already by her beloved child's side. Her baby! Behind her blue eyes her soul was aflame with a passionate championship.

"Madeline, he went away without saying a word," said April. "And we were quite friendly before. Why did he do it, do you suppose?"

"Perhaps he wasn't thinking what he was doing, darling," suggested Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling herself a coward. If this child of hers had really lost her heart to this fine man who didn't care a snap of his fingers

about her, Mrs. Metcalfe felt that she would even go to the length of getting off at Marseilles and going home again. But she couldn't have done so surely, not in so short a time! And then Mrs. Metcalfe thought of the tall grey-haired man that she had left behind. How long had it taken her? And with much less excuse, too, because she was twenty-five years older.

"Do men do things like that?" went on April, pursuing her own train of thought.

"Sometimes, if they are preoccupied," said Mrs. Metcalfe, seeing out of the corner of her eye that Flavia and Major Carew were coming towards them again.

"Oh," and then April flushed painfully. "Here he is with Flavia," she whispered.

"Yes," and then Mrs. Metcalfe wondered desperately how she could convey to April that she must not look as if she minded if Major Carew seemed to prefer her sister. It would have to be done with all the tenderness of which she was capable. Why had such a condition of things come to pass? thought Mrs. Metcalfe passionately.

"Hallo, you've got up then," said Flavia. "I've just been to have my hair cut. Why don't you go and have yours? He's free now because such lots of people have gone on shore."

"Shall I, Madeline?" said April, raising her eyes to her mother's face. Something told her to keep her eyes away from Major Carew in case he might see something that she didn't want him to see. It was always the same, she thought, clenching her hands

in the soft pockets of her jersey. Flavia got everything. And she had lent her her tinselly cap to keep her hair tidy in the evenings because Flavia's was packed. She had looked nice in it. Terribly nice, thought April passionately.

"Yes, darling, it seems a good opportunity," said Mrs. Metcalfe placidly. "Come along and I'll take you down." She threaded her arm through April's and drew her away. Flavia laughed as she stood by Major Carew's side and watched them.

"Now they'll be perfectly happy," she said carelessly. "Can't you see now how I feel out of it sometimes?"

"Your sister looks very pulled down," said Major Carew, not answering Flavia's question. A man of the world, he knew to a fraction what was going on in Mrs. Metcalfe's mind. At least he thought he knew. But, all the same. . . . He continued to walk by Flavia's side.

And a great many people commented on it, including some of the men. Carew was making a bit of a fool of himself, they decided, although the girl was undoubtedly attractive. And the mother was nice, too, everything as it should be there. The relations were nice too: at least Mrs. Metcalfe's brother was Collector of Wandara and that was all right. But Carew had got a temper and so had the girl, cogitated an old Colonel who had noticed Flavia one day when nobody else had been there trying to get her deck-chair out of a bunch of others and repeatedly saying "damn" under her breath. And saying it with her

teeth ominously clenched too, thought the old Colonel, hurriedly retreating into the smoking-room in case he might be called upon to help. She and Carew together would make the fur fly, he confided to an old civilian friend of his as the two sat at the smoking-room window watching the people walk round the deck.

"H'm, he's old enough to know better," grumbled the civilian, glancing at Flavia's delicate profile and delicious colouring, and thinking that if he had the chance he would do exactly the same.

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CHAPTER XIV

FLAVIA'S conquest went to her head. She began to boast about it to April. Port Said and the Canal were things of the past. They were well into the Red Sea. Sports and dances went on unceasingly. Even April began to enjoy herself in a quiet way. She had regained all her old charm and beauty. It became a joke on board that the sisters were so alike. Young men hovered round April and implored her to dance. But she would not dance. She was adamant about it.

"Why won't you dance, sweetheart?" asked Mrs. Metcalfe. She and April were sitting together on deck as they always did, their deck-chairs close together. Miss Baker generally sat next to them. They had got to know her quite well. She was much more interesting than she looked, April decided. She had heaps to say and said it in a quiet humorous voice.

"Mother, I couldn't," said April vehemently. She kept her eyes fixed on her crosswork.

"No?" and then Mrs. Metcalfe left it at that. Inwardly she felt that she knew why April would not dance. Inwardly too she knew that her beloved child was suffering. But she did not quite know how deeply April was suffering. April kept that to herself.

It was at night that it was worst. Flavia would come down at about eleven and generally begin by

grumbling. It was so ridiculous the way that Mother would hang about upstairs until Flavia was ready to come to bed.

"I'm not ready," grumbled Flavia. "The fun begins at about eleven. All the girls are allowed to stay up without their mothers. It's so ridiculous."

"Well, but if she feels like that," April would say wearily. And then she would clench her hands down by her sides as Flavia went on.

"Shall I or shall I not accept Ronald Carew when he proposes to me?" she would meditate aloud, and she would glance at April's averted face and smile wickedly.

"Supposing he doesn't ask you?" said April one night. She said it bitterly. She loathed the way that Flavia spoke about the man that she, April, had enshrined in her heart. He was splendid, gallant. It was outrageous that she should regard him as she did, as only a sort of feeble suppliant for her favours.

"Won't he? he will!" said Flavia meaningly. "He nearly did to-night. We were going up into the bows, I had dodged Mother, and that idiot of a Miss Baker stopped me and told me that Mother was looking for me. I hate that woman," said Flavia vindictively. "People as ugly as that ought not to be allowed to live."

"She isn't as ugly as all that," cried April indignantly.

"She is," said Flavia, in whose mind the incident was rankling. Especially as Major Carew had instantly stopped taking her into the bows and had said that

of course if Mrs. Metcalfe was looking for her she must go.

"But he will to-morrow," said Flavia complacently, who had forgotten her annoyance because she had just caught sight of herself in the long glass. "It's people's bodies that give them all the fun," she said, and she suddenly turned and kissed her bare satiny shoulder. "I'm frightfully glad that I've got a nice one."

"You make me sick," said April in a stifled voice from under the bedclothes.

"You've got a nice one too. Only you keep it so frightfully bottled up," went on Flavia. "You'll never have any fun if you spend your time in India sitting by Mother and doing crosswork."

"I do have fun," said April. "I go in for the sports. And I dressed up for the fancy dress dance. What more do you want?"

"You didn't dance," said Flavia. "And that fat boy in the I.C.S. was in despair because you didn't. You could easily make him propose if you wanted to."

"That fat creature! Why he's only about twenty," said April, and her soft laugh rippled out. But her wounded spirit was a little soothed. If even one dull young man liked her enough for Flavia to notice there must be something attractive about her. If only she wouldn't talk any more about Major Carew.

But Flavia liked Major Carew more than she would admit. Also he had private means: he had conveyed that to her rather shyly a night or two before. He was extremely good-looking too. He certainly was

rather inscrutable and he might be a little difficult to manage sometimes. But she would be able to arrange all that, thought Flavia, getting skilfully into her soft nightdress and thinking how he had flushed and then paled that very evening when she had pretended that she was going to let him kiss her and had then drawn back. Frantic fun that, making a man tremble and clench his teeth, thought Flavia. And then that donkey of a Miss Baker had stepped in and spoilt it all.

"I suppose you're getting furious because I will keep the light on," she said, and she said it more kindly than usual. April's soft outline under the sheet looked somehow fragile and forlorn.

"I'm used to it," said April bitterly. Could you almost hate your own sister? she wondered, turning her head on her pillow and staring at the white-painted wall. Why had they ever come to India if it was going to be like this? And she had thought that it was going to be such fun.

"Let's both get engaged," said Flavia conversationally. "Then Mother can marry that Maxwell man. Do you think she wants to?" she asked, reaching out for the electric switch and snapping it up.

"I don't know," said April, suddenly breathless. Then there must be something in it if Flavia had noticed it too. She had never said anything about it before.

"I believe she does," said Flavia. But other people's affairs never interested Flavia for very long. "How boiling the cabin is," she grumbled. "But never mind, perhaps by this time to-morrow I shall be engaged.

If Fats doesn't come up to the scratch you can be my bridesmaid, April. What would you like to wear?"

But April had got her fingers in her ears. She knew by experience that if she kept them there long enough Flavia would stop talking. Her mother to marry that tall grey-haired man at home! Then what would become of her, April? Flavia would marry Major Carew, she would be left. The porthole showed a glimmering round of pale light before April closed her eyes on a new day.

CHAPTER XV

MISS BAKER had not always wanted to be a missionary. There had been a time when she had thought that she was going to be happy. That had been twenty years before, when she left the good school that she had been at for three years and had gone to the little country Rectory to keep house for her father, who was a widower. She was his only daughter and they had been very happy together. And then more happiness drifted along and blew its soft breath on Margaret Baker. There was a curate, tall and athletic, at her father's church, and he had seemed to like her. And then new people came to the big house on the top of the hill, and the nice sporting man who lived in it became active on the Church Council, and the curate called on them, as of course he had to do, and a few months later he got engaged to the pretty up-to-date daughter of the nice sporting man. And that had been the end of Margaret Baker's fragile romance. Nothing in it at all, to the outsider. But Margaret Baker had adored the curate because he was fine and manly and the thought of him engaged to someone else was torture. Also in her morbid self-distrust she felt perhaps that he had noticed that she had adored him. So then she just sank into the typical clergyman's daughter's rut of slaving

about the parish and not caring about new clothes and thinking that the world begins and ends in a Working Party. And that went on until her father died and she had to leave the Rectory. Two months spent with a married brother whose wife didn't like her convinced Margaret that she could not go on like that. And then the kindly all-embracing Mission Field opened its hospitable arms to her, as to many other lonely single women, and she took a year's very excellent training and then went out to India.

And now Miss Baker was thirty-seven, with rather bony hands and thin hair and with eyes that required pince-nez. But her life in India had done her good. It had broadened her outlook, and not made her narrow-minded as it does some missionaries. She had had the sense to realize that the best and fullest life for a woman is to be the wife of a good man who adores her. That anything else is really second best. But that it can be a very good second best if you don't allow yourself to become bitter and resentful. So people liked Miss Baker, especially women. Mrs. Metcalfe liked her and so did April. Flavia didn't, but that was largely because she didn't bother. Flavia could never bother about people if they did not immediately interest her. So she let Miss Baker see that she thought her dowdy and uninteresting, and as Miss Baker resented it, as any normal woman would, their relations were not too cordial.

"How is the sweet little daughter to-day?" said Miss Baker, sitting and working and knowing that

Mrs. Metcalfe would grasp that she was speaking about April, so that she need not say her name.

"I don't know." Mrs. Metcalfe had spent a very bad night. Her own affairs worried her as well as her fear for April's happiness. She stopped knitting and stared out to sea. The ship was slipping past queer rocky islands blazing with sun. One of them had a lighthouse on it. What a life for the two or three men who had charge of that lighthouse! How they must long for the day when they got a chance of a few hours' leave at Perim. They were due at Perim that evening, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, beginning to knit again.

"I'm sorry. Is she feeling ill again? Surely not, it's so very calm," said Miss Baker, who was doing exquisite work on a frame. Lace work with shepherdeses and lambs on it and a man lurking in the background. You could not even keep a man out of your needlework, thought Miss Baker, who mercifully had developed a sense of humour as she got older.

"No, not ill exactly." Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly felt that she was too worried to keep her affairs to herself any longer. She and Miss Baker had sat together practically all the time since Gibraltar. Very often in the evenings too. She turned a quick glance on her and laid down her work. "Do you know, I'm so worried that I think I shall go off my head if I don't tell someone?" she said suddenly.

"Tell me, then," said Miss Baker placidly. "Only mind that nobody else hears." She glanced round her swiftly. "No, we're perfectly safe," she said. "Go on, my dear."

"Well then"—and then Mrs. Metcalfe was off. The recital took about three-quarters of an hour. She told Miss Baker first about John Maxwell and then about April and Ronald Carew. She spoke simply. Miss Baker listened to the end and then she turned her plain face to Mrs. Metcalfe and it was illumined.

"You are a very lucky woman to have won the love of a man like that," she said, and her pale eyes were full of tears behind the faintly coloured glasses.

"I know I am," said Mrs. Metcalfe. And then her own eyes filled with tears. "But how can I be happy if April isn't?" she whispered. "I simply adore April, she has always been so awfully, awfully sweet to me."

"Yes, and she is prettier than Flavia," said Miss Baker briefly, and she glanced up the deck to where the two girls were playing deck tennis. April was playing with Major Carew, and Flavia for partner had the fat boy in the I.C.S. whom she had scoffed at.

"Do you think so?" said Mrs. Metcalfe wistfully.

"Yes," said Miss Baker briefly again, and she stuck the needle into the eye of the lurking man on her embroidery and had an altogether unchristian wish that she could stick it into Flavia, although somewhere where it would not hurt so much as in the eye.

"What is going to happen?" said Mrs. Metcalfe hopelessly. "We shall be in Bombay in a week. Am I to have the acute misery of seeing April in despair because her sister is engaged to a man that she herself cares for? Because although it seems ridiculous to say that April could really care for a man of whom

she has seen so little, yet I believe that she does. April is like me," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply.

"No, I don't believe it will come to that," said Miss Baker sensibly. "Cannot a delightful and intelligent man like Major Carew see that Flavia would not make him happy?"

"No," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "He is infatuated with her. And in a way I don't blame him. And I want Flavia to be happy," she went on earnestly. "Only I don't want her to marry a man that she does not love. And I am sure that she does not love Ronald Carew. She is flattered and thinks it all tremendous fun to have a good-looking man like that paying attention to her. And she will accept him if he proposes because Flavia does not, at any rate yet, know what real love is. April does," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "And for this to happen at the very outset of April's life may do her an irreparable injury. It will kill me if April is unhappy," said Mrs. Metcalfe passionately.

And then they had to stop talking because the game of deck tennis came to an end. April and Flavia and the fat I.C.S. youth and Major Carew all came down the deck together. The girls, dressed alike in pale yellow cardigans and pleated skirts and white stockings and white crêpe-soled shoes, looked delicious. For an instant even Miss Baker could not tell them apart, and then she could. April was smiling prettily at her, showing all her little even teeth. Flavia had only said "Hallo" carelessly to her mother and had then flopped down into an empty deck-chair, not taking any notice of Miss Baker.

"I'll get you a lime squash." Major Carew was standing and looking down at Flavia as she lounged.

"All right, if you like." Flavia was smiling up at him. But April heard her careless words and she clenched her teeth. If only Flavia would behave decently to him. That attitude that he was only there to fetch and carry for her. It was degrading.

"What can I get you?" The fat I.C.S. youth was pale and eager. April was kind and patient with him. Miss Baker noted her anxiety not to hurt his feelings by a refusal.

"Some lemonade, if it would not be too much trouble," she said gently, and then as he hurried off down the deck she turned to her mother and laid a soft hand on hers. "I had to say something although I don't want it," she confessed. "I think he's so pathetic. When he gets hot he *shines*."

CHAPTER XVI

ADEN looks very weird and romantic as it lies under the blazing sun with not a tree or blade of grass to be seen. And by seven o'clock that evening it looked more romantic still with its twinkling lights and the blaze of more concentrated light where the Club stands. April, with a greater desolation in her heart than she had ever thought possible, stood and looked at it from the top deck of the *Formala*. There was going to be another dance and she felt that she hated the idea of it. Major Carew with his eyes all alight and Flavia only really making use of him. Even if she married him she would only make use of him, thought April. A means to a lively, delightful life. And he was worth so much, so infinitely much more, thought April, trying all the same to stifle her thoughts of him. Because even she was not fit to raise her eyes to him, she thought passionately. Only she did not want him to be wretched. To be wretched as she knew he would be wretched if he was married to Flavia, thought April, raising her head with an infinite weariness because she knew that it was time she went down to dress, and Flavia would be there, all flushed and excited with her triumph.

She was. Her cabin trunk was dragged out into the middle of the floor, and with a great deal of rustling of tissue paper a perfectly new dress was being got out.

"You don't mean to say that you're going to wear that!" April stopped just inside the curtain and stared.

"I am. And so must you wear yours. Why on earth have you been so long? I've washed, and put on my stockings and everything."

"Why must we always dress alike?" said April, thinking of the despair that lay ahead of her in having to drag out her trunk and unearth the new frock that she felt not the faintest inclination to put on.

"Because we must," said Flavia shortly, who liked looking exactly like April and yet having so much more fun.

"Oh," said April hopelessly. And she waited until Flavia had gone to begin. Mrs. Metcalfe, coming along the corridor to see if her daughters were ready, found her there alone, combing her yellow hair.

"Ready, my sweet?" said Mrs. Metcalfe, who also looked extremely nice in something black and shimmering.

"Yes," said April, going on combing her hair.

"Darling, try to enjoy it all," said Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling her heart ache at the sight of April's obvious dejection.

"Madeline, I can't," said April, and she suddenly dropped the comb and began hopelessly to cry.

"For my sake, try," said Mrs. Metcalfe, her eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, that we were there!" sobbed April.

"Darling, we very nearly are," urged Mrs. Metcalfe. As always, when anything distressed her, her thoughts flew to her lover. "Only five more days."

"I'm a fool," said April. She sniffed violently and smiled through her tears. "I'll dance to-night, I really will," she declared. "Madeline, I'll dance if you do."

"All right," said Mrs. Metcalfe, her spirits going up with a leap. Since early that morning she had felt more cheerful. Flavia had walked about a good deal with another man, an older man in the Political. Mrs. Metcalfe had watched her after lunch. Until this day this man had kept rather to himself. But he had been sitting and watching the game of deck tennis that morning, and after lunch he had spoken to Flavia.

"How sweet you look in that yellow dress," she said, and she came further into the cabin and kissed April's tear-stained face. "Such a beautiful little daughter."

"Do you think so?" April's face brightened. She knew that Flavia was lovely and that she was supposed to be like her and yet she could never visualize herself as anything but tongue-tied and stupid.

"Yes, I know it," said Mrs. Metcalfe quietly. "Come along, my precious, or we shall be very late. The bugle went some time ago."

So that all promised well. But it did not turn out as it promised. But only Miss Baker saw how badly it really did turn out. Major Carew was absorbed, desperately absorbed, and all the more so because Flavia would not give him all the dances that she had promised. Flavia was intrigued with the elderly man in the Political. Lots of people had talked about him before and said how frightfully clever he was and that he was in the running for one of the Governorships of a Northern Province. She spoke carelessly to Major Carew, who

answered furiously. Miss Baker, sitting rather far back in a corner, because all the deck-chairs had been pushed back to give a clearer deck space, watched them. April she had not seen since a few moments before, when she had passed her with her small mouth set desperately, going in the direction of the top deck. The top deck was dark at this hour, and Miss Baker felt a pang at her heart as she felt pretty sure that April was going to hide herself there and perhaps cry foolishly. Her mother was dancing and enjoying herself: Miss Baker had seen her come by in the arms of an elderly Colonel. And now Flavia and Major Carew were having a row: Miss Baker felt certain that they were. His eyes were dark with anger and Flavia was replying hotly.

However, in a moment or two Flavia relented. She was too calculating, thought Miss Baker, to let one man go until she was sure of another. She put a swift hand on Major Carew's black sleeve and then glanced down at her programme. Then she gave it to him, and he scribbled something on it and gave it back to her with a quick smile. And then he disappeared into the smoking-room. And Flavia, left alone, glanced round her and then smiled brilliantly as the elderly man in the Political appeared from somewhere and took possession of her.

Miss Baker then went on reading. But her heart was with the dear child, who she felt perfectly certain was crying her heart out in the darkness of the top deck. However, it was not her business. Life was hard, and perhaps the sooner the young realized it the

better, thought Miss Baker, reading mechanically on and wishing that it was time to go to bed.

She read until she heard a quiet step beside her. It was Major Carew, smiling down at her. "Have you seen Miss Metcalfe?" he asked.

"Yes," said Miss Baker, a dreadful idea jumping into her mind from apparently nowhere. In one moment she had forgotten that she was a missionary and that of all things in this world truth was the most important. "I have just seen her go up to the top deck," she said.

"Alone?" asked Major Carew, and there was something in his voice that made Miss Baker feel that perhaps it would have been better to let Flavia marry this young man and get what she deserved when the glamour of her had worn off.

"Yes," said Miss Baker mildly. And as Major Carew went off down the deck, almost forgetting to say "Thank you," she lowered her eyes on to the printed page again. But the words jumped in front of her. She took off her spectacles and wiped them and then put them on again. Without her spectacles she could see distant objects well. Major Carew's black back disappearing up the companion way, for instance. However—Miss Baker made an effort to concentrate on her book again. She would doubtless be punished for her sin, but not just yet, perhaps. Besides, Flavia ought to have made an effort to be polite to her. Meanwhile the top deck was darker than Major Carew had expected. He twice stumbled up against whispering couples, apologized and went on. And at last he found the pale blurred figure that he had been looking for. A fugitive

gleam from an inadequate light showed him the yellow hair that he knew and adored. Alone and in tears: Major Carew went down on his knees and felt the tears prickling under his own eyelids.

"Sweet, don't!" he said passionately. "I know I was a brute, but you drive me crazy. I shall go mad if you cry. Kiss me."

"I . . ." April's voice was low and stammering.

"I know . . . don't say it, it was my fault. I love you so frightfully, let's stop all this misery. Besides, there's no earthly reason why we shouldn't marry, is there? Say you will: no, you needn't if you don't want to. Only kiss me. If you knew how I had longed . . . Sweetheart . . ."

"I . . ." and then April's voice failed under his seeking lips. In fact, so great was her rapture that she could not speak. He stood up and drew her with him. "My little girl!" he said and he caught her to his heart with a passion too great for words.

"And I thought it was Flavia!" April was standing with bent head. And as Major Carew heard the words he felt for one second as if his heart had actually stopped beating. He had proposed to Flavia's sister. The horror of it struck him dumb. He must of course . . .

But his hesitation was his undoing. April's soft voice was innocent and faltering. "If you knew how I adored you the minute I looked at you," she said. "And Flavia would only triumph over me because she thought she had got you. I don't mean anything unkind, but Flavia would not have made you happy. She's like that, although I admit that she's most frightfully,

frightfully pretty. Besides, she does not love you really. Not like I do," said April simply.

"No?" And then as there was only one thing to do, Major Carew did it. But he felt again as he had felt when his father told him that he had got to be a soldier and that all this nonsense about the Navy had got to be stopped. He saw his father's unyielding face again and his own passionate fear lest he should be betrayed into womanish tears. He took April into his arms again.

"Sweet little girl!" he said, and he stooped his head and kissed her soft, innocent mouth.

CHAPTER XVII

AN hour later, Miss Baker, who had finished her book, was thinking that it was time that she went to bed. The dance was still in full swing. With unconcealed joy she had seen Flavia arrive, stand rather impatiently as if she was waiting for someone and then go away again. And then Mrs. Metcalfe came hurrying along the deck. She simply sat down by Miss Baker and began to cry.

"My dear, what is the matter?" asked Miss Baker, putting down her book and taking off her spectacles in her agitation.

"April is engaged to Major Carew," choked Mrs. Metcalfe.

"She isn't!" This was almost more than Miss Baker could bear. Success beyond her wildest dreams. Not knowing that she did so, she breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving to some distant Being who by all the canons of ordinary behaviour ought only to be terribly shocked.

"She is," said Mrs. Metcalfe, sitting up and wiping her eyes. "I'm such a fool," she said, "but I feel that you'll understand how I feel. I've longed for it so—that April should be happy."

"Whatever does Flavia say?" asked Miss Baker, feeling that she must know this first.

"She doesn't know yet. Major Carew came and told me just now," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "I rushed down to see April at once; he said that she had gone down to her cabin."

"What did April say?"

"Nothing. There was no need. Only just that she had adored him since the very beginning. We had never spoken of it openly before: we couldn't. It all seemed so hopeless," said Mrs. Metcalfe, her eyes shining like quite a young girl's.

"Well, I don't think I have ever been so glad about anything," said Miss Baker. "In fact——" she began to collect her book and shawl preparatory to getting out of her chair. "I feel like you do, as if I must have a good cry about it," she said, and she got slowly up.

"You dear, you've always been so sweet about it," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "Think of to-morrow: the joy of it all. I wonder——" Mrs. Metcalfe broke off. "Could I catch the mail from here?" she said.

"Yes, if you post before midnight. At least it says so on the notice board," said Miss Baker. Try as she would, an acute desolation swept over her. Even this woman who was older than she was had a man who loved her, she thought, saying good night to Mrs. Metcalfe and walking slowly away down the deck. She went downstairs and shut herself up in one of the ladies' bathrooms and cried until she could cry no more. Things were so unjustly divided, she thought passionately, wiping her faded eyes and trying to think of all the things she had that other people hadn't, and that they ought to be enough for her. And then she felt better for the avalanche

of tears. She had things that other people hadn't, she decided, going into her cabin and seeing one of her cabin companions shyly and hurriedly struggling into her boudoir cap to hide that she had hardly any hair at all. Now that would be ghastly, thought Miss Baker, withdrawing gently and looking as if she had not seen. Both she and the other woman in the cabin always did that, although they knew about this deficiency quite well. To be a lonely woman with no hair was worse than being a lonely woman with hair, thought Miss Baker, answering the shy lady's gentle call to come in now because she was quite ready.

Meanwhile Flavia had met Major Carew on the hurricane deck. White with rage, thought Flavia, preparing for an exciting scene. He began to speak, but she interrupted him.

"I waited for you but you never came," she said. "It wasn't my fault, you needn't get angry with me."

"I'm not in the least angry," said Major Carew, who in fact was only conscious of an overwhelming desire to get away to the smoking-room, where he could drink himself into, at least, temporary oblivion.

"Well, you look something very odd," said Flavia grudgingly.

"I'm extremely happy," said Major Carew carefully. He was a man of amazing self-control when it became necessary. "Your sister has just promised to marry me."

"April!"

"Yes, April," said Major Carew. "Good night, Flavia," and without waiting to look at Flavia again he walked on, up the deck, through the crowds of people

drinking iced lemon squash and waiting for the band to begin again, and on into the smoking-room.

And there at half-past twelve he still was. The old Colonel, who had lost rather badly at Bridge and was cross because of it, sat glowering at him from his own corner. Carew was drunk, he concluded, although he was perfectly quiet about it, thank God; but then the man would be a gentleman, even in his cups.

And at one o'clock Major Carew found himself in his berth. Fortunately he had a cabin to himself and he had not had to go down any stairs to get to it. But how had he got there without accident, he wondered, before rolling on to his side and sinking into a profound and sudden slumber.

But only the old Colonel knew that, and as he had a very high regard for Major Carew he was not likely ever to tell anybody else.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE next morning the only person who felt suicidal was Miss Baker. Major Carew waked with too severe a headache to think of anything but his own immediate discomfort. However, his cabin steward, who was an ex-Tommy and a man of varied experience, proved extremely helpful. By nine o'clock Major Carew felt better. An extremely hot bath followed by a cold shower had worked wonders. He arrived on deck looking much as usual. He glanced round for April, who was now to be his concern for all time, as he thought grimly. Where was she? Probably too alarmed to appear.

This was a fact. At that very moment she sat on her berth looking white and shaken. Mrs. Metcalfe sat beside her holding her cold little hand.

"Flavia, you ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said passionately.

"I'm not in the least ashamed," stormed Flavia. "I simply say to Major Carew that I can't give him as many dances as he thinks he ought to have, and he goes and proposes to April. She's got to give him up, I tell you!"

"Go upstairs to breakfast and leave me with April," blazed Mrs. Metcalfe. And Flavia was frightened. Her mother so very rarely lost her temper. She swung

round and left the cabin, tearing the green curtain along the bar with a rattle of brass rings and leaving it flapping.

"Madeline, he told me that he loved me!" April's eyes with dark circles round them, for she had hardly slept all night, were wide and blue in her pale face.

"Sweetheart, don't listen to Flavia," said Mrs. Metcalfe. She got up, letting go of April's hand, adjusted the curtain and sat down beside her again.

"It's taken all the joy out of it," said April sombrely.

"No, it hasn't, darling, the joy is there all right," said Mrs. Metcalfe, longing as she had never longed before for John to come and make it all right.

"I can't feel it," shivered April. "I can't go up and see Major Carew in case he wishes that he hadn't said what he did last night."

"Don't be silly, darling," said Mrs. Metcalfe tenderly. "Of course he meant what he said."

"Go and find out if he did," said April suddenly.

"Oh, April!" Mrs. Metcalfe turned a little pale. The lurking fear at her heart became more real. She too had hardly slept. Because, after all, it was a most astounding thing that after the persistent attention that Major Carew had paid her elder daughter, he should propose to April. Mrs. Metcalfe had turned and twisted and turned again in her narrow berth until the small hours of the morning. And now——

"Please," said April urgently.

"But Major Carew will think it so odd."

"No, he won't. If he did not mean it he will be glad of an excuse to get out of it before he sees me again,"

said April heavily. Although in fact, at the moment, she felt that she hardly cared if he did back out of it. She was so tired. And Flavia had been so *awful*. . . .

"Very well," said Mrs. Metcalfe despairingly. In her heart she cried out for her lover as she went along the corridor and up the stairs. To have left him—for this! She went through the open companion door out on to the deck.

And Fate was kind. Ronald Carew had not felt like an immediate breakfast. He was standing staring out at the rapidly receding coast of Arabia. Astounding to think that a fortnight ago he was a practically carefree man, he reflected, wondering if he dare risk a cigarette and deciding that it was better not.

Mrs. Metcalfe's soft step made him turn round. April! Now to behave as little like a cad as was possible, he thought. Because the child loved him and he must not let her guess that her love was not returned. But it was April's mother. Major Carew liked Mrs. Metcalfe; she was his idea of what a woman over forty ought to look like. He smiled at her. "Come back to the rail again. I want to say something to you," said Mrs. Metcalfe. In spite of herself she was almost in tears.

"To me? Of course," said Major Carew, thinking that it was early in the day to talk of ways and means, but that probably this woman being a widow felt that she had to.

"April wants to know whether you mean what you said last night," burst out Mrs. Metcalfe.

Release! Ronald Carew stood quite still.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," faltered Mrs. Metcalfe wretchedly, "except that she does."

"Has she thought better of it herself?" asked Major Carew, forgetting that a moment or two ago he had not felt well enough to smoke and fumbling in his pocket for his cigarette-case.

"No," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "But April is like that. She couldn't endure . . ."

"To think that she had perhaps taken me on the rebound," said Major Carew, feeling in the other pocket of his blazer for his matches.

"No, no," said Mrs. Metcalfe. Taking a swift survey of the deserted deck, she snatched her handkerchief out of her sleeve and wiped her eyes. "I'm a perfect fool," she quavered. "But April is to me . . ."

"The light of your eyes," finished Major Carew. "Yes, I thought so. You and she are very much alike. Tell her not to be a little goose," he said, and he struck a match with rather a trembling hand, hoping desperately that Mrs. Metcalfe would not notice that it was trembling. And then he apologized rather shakily. "I'm so sorry," he said, "do you mind my smoking?"

"No, of course I don't," said Mrs. Metcalfe, staring out to the rapidly receding coast and knowing in her heart of hearts that this charming man did not love her daughter at all, but that she was going to hold him to it because he would, in time.

"Send her up to me," he said after a little pause. "I don't suppose she feels any more inclined for breakfast than I do. I'm getting on in years for this sort of excitement," he said dryly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she rushed away from his side like a child. Thankful to get away, thought Ronald Carew, feeling inclined to laugh, and then more inclined to cry, and finally deciding to drown his cigarette in the small keg of water placed conveniently at his elbow, because it tasted filthy.

But by the time April appeared he felt better. Mrs. Metcalfe had been tenderly bracing with her. "Don't look wretched, April," she admonished. "Men, however much in love they are, like cheerful faces."

So April with her delicately flushing face looked very desirable in spite of the dark circles round her eyes. She came so timidly across the deck that Major Carew was deeply touched.

"Tired of me already, you funny little child?" he said, and he walked forward and took her cold hand in his.

"No, it wasn't that . . . it was only that . . ." stammered April, her eyes riveted on his.

"Goose," said Major Carew tenderly, and as there was only one very old monkey-like lascar in sight and he had his back turned, Major Carew drew April into his arms and kissed her soft trembling mouth.

CHAPTER XIX

THE *Formala* was beside itself with excitement over the engagement of Major Carew and April Metcalfe. "But he was in love with the elder one, surely," people said and gathered in music saloon and alleyway to discuss it. Even the smoking-room joined in when Major Carew wasn't there. The old Colonel who had helped him to bed the night before remained silent, only saying that he was thankful that Carew had had the sense to choose the younger one, because the elder one had the temper of a fiend. And the man in the Political heard this and took it to heart. Although he still paid Flavia plenty of attention, because she was extremely pretty and could be uncommonly amusing too if she liked.

But the women were the more excited. Especially Mrs. Payne, who, after a very late breakfast, sought out Miss Baker, who was sitting in a corner a little away from her usual place, and sat down beside her on the footrest of a vacant deck-chair.

"Schemer!" she said briefly.

"I?" said Miss Baker shakily. Her eyes had been riveted on her work and she had not heard Mrs. Payne coming.

"No, not exactly schemer. Sensible and intelligent woman," said Mrs. Payne softly. She glanced round to be sure that nobody was within earshot.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that my cabin is just behind where you were sitting last night," said Mrs. Payne. "I went to bed early because I had a headache and couldn't have the light on because people would see in if I did. But I saw April go up to the top deck. I saw Major Carew come and ask you if you had seen Flavia: that is the worst of these deck cabins, you can hear every word everyone says, and I heard you send him after April. And I want to tell you that I admire you for it."

"Don't," said Miss Baker, and she clenched her nice strong teeth on her lower lip.

"But I do. Why did you do it?" asked Mrs. Payne curiously, after a little pause.

"Because I know Major Carew to be a kind and chivalrous man, and I also know that Flavia Metcalfe would make him wretched," said Miss Baker calmly. But her heart was terrified and fluttering under her uninteresting woolly coat.

"But it was a terribly risky thing to do, to send a man up on to a dark deck hoping that because of the dark he would propose to the wrong sister," said Mrs. Payne slowly. "Supposing someone tells him that you did it?"

"They wouldn't. At least, nobody can but you. And I should hardly think that you would be so incredibly mean," said Miss Baker, suddenly forgetting that she was a missionary, and that it was supposed to be Christian to speak kindly to everyone, however hateful they are being.

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Payne icily. She had hoped that Miss Baker, stupid missionary

woman that she was, would deny it, and then she would simply have been able to despise her, and go away and forget about it. But now she was angry.

"I do," blazed Miss Baker.

"Naturally," said Mrs. Payne. She got up. "I don't know what I shall do about it, now," she said, and got up and walked away leaving Miss Baker staring after her.

"God help me!" cried Miss Baker inwardly, going on knitting with a dreadful clutching at her heart. She saw it all flood out in front of her. The exposure of her innocent scheme, the consequences of which she had not stopped really to think about. She had only done it because she was fond of April and her mother, and Major Carew had been kind to her, and she knew that he would not be happy with Flavia, and now—Miss Baker put down her work and leaned back in her chair, and behind smoked glasses her eyes were closed. But the pale eyelashes of them never stopped quivering. What had she done? What had she done? And what should she do next? that was the awful question that had to be settled now. Mrs. Payne was not to be trusted, especially now that she had lost her temper: she might have been all right before, because apparently she was not a really unpleasant woman. But where an attractive man was concerned women could never be trusted, thought Miss Baker, remembering an incident that had once shaken the very foundations of the colourless missionary household of which she formed a part. One of the ladies of the Mission had fallen in love with the Baptist missionary, who had a wife at home, and very reprehensibly her love had

been returned. Certainly the wife at home was mean and had an atrocious temper, and had made the life of the cultured ardent young missionary a burden when she was with him. But that had not seemed to matter at all, remembered Miss Baker, who had been younger then, and had dared to take up the cudgels on his behalf. Besides, the girl in question was dainty and innocent, so there was an excuse for the ardent young missionary, who had tried to see beauty and the ideal in his own married life and had not been able to. However, the judgment of the other ladies of the Mission had been severe and the young delinquent had abruptly been hustled off to somewhere else; and when, a few months later, the Baptist missionary had suddenly died of cholera, everyone had looked portentous and had said that it was a judgment.

And here it was again. Because of an attractive man and a sweet young girl all Miss Baker's ideas of right and wrong were reversed. Because she was jealous, Mrs. Payne was quite prepared to be nasty. But Miss Baker was not going to have that, she decided, getting up so suddenly that her alarmed knitting fell out of her lap on to the ground, getting hopelessly tangled up. She was going to get in first. She went off in hot pursuit of Major Carew. She would confess it all to him. He was kind and understanding and would know what it was best to do.

She ran him to earth on the hurricane deck. April and her mother were in the baggage-room putting away clothes they did not want. So was Flavia, whom he had seen for one dreadful ten minutes soon after

breakfast. He sat alone and read. It was hot: but not nearly so hot as it had been in the Red Sea. But hot enough for him to wear a well-ironed Palm Beach suit in which he looked extremely nice. He stared at his book, but could not really grasp what he was reading. He tried to pretend that he did not know that Miss Baker was standing in front of him. Next to Flavia, Miss Baker was the last person he wanted to see.

"May I speak to you, Major Carew?" she faltered out after an agonized moment's hesitation.

"Oh, Miss Baker! I beg your pardon: do sit down." Major Carew was instantly on his feet. He dragged an empty chair towards him. Most of the chairs round him were empty as everyone was playing games. Competitions were in full swing now that it was cooler.

"Sit down," he said briefly.

"I have something to tell you," said Miss Baker, and she felt in her pocket for her workmanlike handkerchief and twisted it in her damp hands.

"Tell on," said Major Carew kindly. He linked his hands between his knees and waited.

So Miss Baker told. She told briefly and honestly. She told him that she had done it because she loved April and disliked Flavia. She made no excuses for herself. And then she sat and waited for his cold denunciation. But it did not come.

"I was fairly certain that that was how it happened," he said quietly, and he looked out over the waste of waters round them.

"You knew, then?"

"Not until the deed was done, of course," said Major Carew quietly.

"And now what are you going to do?"

"Nothing," said Major Carew, removing his eyes from the sea and resting them on Miss Baker. "Of course, nothing. What could I do?"

"I don't know," faltered Miss Baker, wondering what it would be like to have a man like this for your very, very own.

"You know I daresay in reality you may have done me a great service," said Major Carew after a long pause.

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Don't," said Miss Baker, and she began weakly to cry.

And that made Major Carew laugh inwardly and instantly feel better. What was it about him that made women begin to weep directly they came near him, he wondered. He comforted Miss Baker, tenderly and kindly, because he could see that she was really unhappy; He spoke to her about himself because he knew that she was to be trusted. He told her perfectly frankly that he had known all the time that he was making a fool of himself over Flavia, but that he could not help it. Also that he would rather ~~perish~~ than tell anyone else this. That at the moment he was suffering acutely, there was no use denying it, but that he would get over it. And that she was not to worry about it any more because there was nothing to worry about. At least—— He hesitated a moment.

"Nobody else knows, do they?" he asked abruptly.

"Mrs. Payne does," said Miss Baker instantly. "She heard it all from her cabin, a deck one. She was in it last night with the light out."

"H'm . . ." Major Carew pondered. "That's a bother. How do you know?" he queried.

"She told me," said Miss Baker tremulously.

"Go to her now and tell her that you have told me and that it's all perfectly all right," said Major Carew. "That it's all absolutely a mistake. That I knew all the time it was April up on the top deck, and went up there on purpose to find her."

"But . . ."

"But it's not true?" smiled Major Carew. "Of course it isn't, but sometimes to save hurting other people truth has to be sacrificed." He stood up. "Go now, will you?" he said, "we mustn't lose any time." He suddenly saw April's sensitive face in front of him and felt that he would mind if it was clouded.

"Yes, I will," burst from Miss Baker, suddenly feeling that everything that she had thought right was now wrong and vice versa, and that she did not care. She hurried away down the deck, leaving him standing and watching her go, and thinking vaguely that to have a good cry was a very much better way of getting rid of superfluous emotion than getting drunk. He would never try that again, he thought, feeling his head spin in the strong light, and sitting rather abruptly down in his chair again.

Meanwhile Mrs. Payne was sceptical but pleasant. After leaving Miss Baker she had met a very nice man

who told her that he had been wanting to speak to her for some time, but had not liked to. But that now he really was going to, because there was so little of the voyage left. So she met Miss Baker as she went hurrying to her deck cabin to fetch her coat, as she and the nice man were going up on to the top deck.

So Miss Baker's stammered news affected her very little.

"That's all right. Splendid!" she murmured absently. "I'm awfully glad to hear it. I hope they'll be very happy," and then she plunged into her cabin to struggle in her tiny wardrobe.

"You won't ever tell anyone what you thought, will you?" insisted Miss Baker, standing in the doorway and watching Mrs. Payne.

"Not I," said Mrs. Payne, busily making herself up for the second time that day in front of the oval looking-glass.

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PART III

CHAPTER XX

THE Collector of an upcountry station in India is a very great person indeed, so he generally has much the nicest bungalow. And so he ought to have, as nowadays to be an official in India is no easy task. You have to be feeble when all your instincts are to be strong. However, if you don't want to lose your job you've got to be feeble, so the thing to do is to be feeble with as much dignity as you can.

And Mr. Despard managed this. His height helped him: he was a very tall man and a very nice-looking one. Also he was a widower, so was quite well off. He was a keen gardener, so the four shiny black malis, who ran about the big compound with water slopping out of square kerosene oil tins, knew that it was of no avail to go to sleep directly the sahib retired into the big white building detached from the main bungalow that was the office. They must work, or Kulloo, the head mali, who expected to sleep from two till four every afternoon, would take a larger percentage from their pay than he already did.

So they sat gloomily grubbing little holes in the ground with a stick and poking dejected cuttings into the earth with their thumbs. And all the time they

talked, shifting the little twisted bidi from one side of their voluble mouths to the other. They squatted in the shelter of a large neem-tree, up the trunk of which little grey squirrels ran, flicking their bushy tails, and chattering. They ran round the trunk in large spirals, reaching at last a jutting branch on which they sat and ate crackling seeds, sitting up holding them in queer little grey paws like tiny hands. Bits of the crackly fragments fell on to the malis' heads, but they were so absorbed that they did not notice them although their heads were bald except for the little tuft of hair that remained in the centre. They were talking about the fuss and excitement that was going on in the low white bungalow behind them. A bungalow that lay now whiter than ever in the blazing noonday sun, with the bougainvillæa-tree up against the wide verandah casting a big black shadow over the gravel drive that came up close to it.

The excitement was because the Collector Sahib was having visitors. Fazal Khan, the old Mohammedan butler, who had been with Despard Sahib ever since he landed in India twenty-two years before, had said so. Also, had not an ayah been engaged? One Mitu, a Madrassi woman related to the ayah at the General Sahib's. And was not all the bungalow being rearranged? The General memsahib had even been round to help and had supervised the durzie who was making new curtains on her own verandah. All was in readiness, and the new arrivals were expected the next day: so said the old Mohammedan cook, who had also been with Despard Sahib since he arrived in India.

And meanwhile, in the large oblong railway carriage with its long leather-covered bunks, Mrs. Metcalfe and her two daughters were thundering northward in the Punjab Mail. The excitement of it all was acute. Even Flavia, apt to be supercilious if anyone else got excited, was enjoying it all. "Madeline, do look! That man is trying to get into the carriage window with all his luggage." April, her fair head well covered by a serviceable solar topi, was almost screaming with excitement.

"Where? Do let me see." All three heads were thrust out of the window. Lower down the train a screaming crowd stood and gesticulated at the Eurasian ticket collector. Turbaned heads were thrust out of carriage windows. The English guard came briskly down the platform, stood and listened to the screaming crowd, listened again, and then shook his head. The green flag wagged relentlessly in his white hand and the train went on again. The little group stood petrified on the platform watching it slide past them. April saw a funny little brown baby slung across the hip of its girl mother, its large eyes made larger by the kohl round them.

"Why, they've been left behind!" gasped April. Her eyes, too, were shining, but she was rather thinner than she had been when she left London. The last five days of the voyage had not been easy, although April had kept her difficulties to herself. Although what were difficulties when a man like Ronald was going to be your husband? thought April, lying with her face close pressed into her pillow as Flavia went on and on

about how she didn't believe that Ronald had meant to propose to her at all. How that he had liked her, Flavia, best. Flavia knew that he had. Although she had begun to think that she would rather marry someone in the I.C.S.

"After all, the position is much better," said Flavia, who had already begun to absorb some of the official snobbishness that makes India the astounding place that it is. But after all, what greater snob than the Indian himself? It is in the air, so how can people who breathe that air fail to absorb it?

"Didn't they get in?" said Mrs. Metcalfe, who looked more like her daughters than ever in her linen frock and sun hat. A fat letter from her lover had been waiting for her in Bombay. It was in her dispatch case now. She had to read it by stealth, which was anguish, because she wanted to read it all the time. But as soon as she got to Wandara she was going to tell her daughters about her engagement, she decided. Now that April was engaged she would not feel it nearly so much, and Flavia would very soon be engaged herself, decided Mrs. Metcalfe. Certainly the man in the Political had not followed up his very decided attentions by giving them any idea that he wanted to see them again. But he was not the only one who was attracted by Flavia, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, who had several times seen her daughter when she had not known that she was being observed.

So Mrs. Metcalfe felt happy. Ronald Carew had seen them off in Bombay after taking them all to lunch at the Yacht Club. His way lay in the opposite direction,

indeed, as he was going to Bangalore. Miles away, thought April, standing and staring at him as he stood tall and well groomed beside her mother, laughing at something she was saying and showing all his nice teeth as he did so. It was one of April's greatest consolations that her lover and her mother got on so well.

Because April needed a certain amount of consolation. To adore and always to have to keep it to yourself is not easy. Instinct told April not to show Ronald Carew quite how much she loved him. Love wasn't quite the word, thought April, standing sometimes in the half light of the main deck with her teeth clenched. And simply because he had taken hold of her hand. He was rather fond of doing that. He would take it and crumple it up in his own and look at the small fingers and shining nails and then smile at her and say what a funny little hand for such a big girl, and once or twice he had lifted it to his mouth and kissed it.

And then April with the fair head on level with her eyes would get a passionate craving to throw all her assumed placidity to the winds and cry his name aloud and have him catch her to his heart and half stifle her with kisses. Like people do in books, thought April miserably. But she only stood still, and once or twice Ronald Carew caught himself wondering whether April was cold, although with a sister like Flavia surely she couldn't be. However, he was not sorry when the voyage was over. He stood and waved to the long train as it slid out from between the wide platforms of Victoria Terminus, and then turned and walked away under the whirring electric fans and among the queer

nondescript people that always gather when a train goes off. That was over, thought Ronald, hailing a taxi and driving to "Jewellers," where he had made up his mind to buy April a very nice ring. To give the child a present gave him pleasure, thought Ronald, choosing a delicious rose-shaped cluster of diamonds. He had the size of her finger with him, so it was all easy enough. But she had been too nervous to go with him and choose it. "I shall be afraid of choosing something too expensive," she had stammered when he had suggested their going together. Flavia would not have been so diffident, thought Ronald with a little wry smile as he stood at the counter signing a cheque, with the nice Englishman in "Jewellers" gazing at him. He knew Major Carew quite well, as he had once been stationed in Bangalore himself.

"Done it at last, you see, Danby," said Ronald, and he pulled the long strip of blotting-paper on the glass counter towards him.

"Really, sir. I wondered, but I hardly liked to ask," said Mr. Danby.

"Yes," said Ronald, smiling down at his signature.

"I hope, sir, that we shall soon be able to suit you with a wedding-ring," said Mr. Danby, beaming from ear to ear.

"Well, I think perhaps that's a little premature, Danby," said Ronald, screwing the cap of his Swan pen on again and putting it back in his pocket.

"May I ask if the young lady is in India?" enquired Mr. Danby, casting a practised but very respectful eye over the completed cheque that Ronald handed to him.

"Yes, I've just seen her off to Wandara," said Ronald, "she and her mother and sister are going to stay with the Collector there—Despard."

"Ah, Mr. Despard gets all the prizes for the Gymkhana from me," said Mr. Danby, beaming still more. "And only yesterday I sent him off an ice bucket and a pair of asparagus servers, and a set of afternoon teaspoons, and a couple of little silver toast racks," said Mr. Danby, now all interest and pleasure.

"Killing the fatted calf," said Ronald, and shaking hands with Mr. Danby he walked out of the shop and got into his taxi again. But somehow these unimportant little details about the household to which April was going had a wonderful effect on him. To have got engaged on a voyage was so ridiculous, really. But to know that the girl he was engaged to had some presentable relations made it all seem more worth while somehow, thought Ronald Carew, arriving back at the Yacht Club feeling more cheerful than he had done for the last fortnight.

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CHAPTER XXI

MR. DESPARD was inwardly stupefied with astonishment at the good looks of the three rather weary travellers who got out of the Punjab Mail as it drew into the long echoing station of Wandara. He was there with two scarlet-coated chuprassies to meet his guests. The train arrived at ten o'clock at night, and Mr. Despard, bareheaded and in evening dress, stood and chatted to the Eurasian stationmaster.

"It is signalled, sir," said the Brahmin assistant stationmaster, padding up in his native shoes and salaaming.

"Thank you, Rama." Mr. Despard had a pleasant way with subordinate Indian officials and they all liked him when they were let alone. But lately there had been a good deal of Red activity in the Punjab and Wandara had not been left out.

"Here it is," said the Eurasian stationmaster, whose name was De Carteret, the relic of some former tragic *mésalliance*, as Mr. Despard often thought.

"Thanks, De Carteret, I shall soon spy them out," said Mr. Despard, and he threw away the remains of his cheroot and stood watching the lights of the long train come winking round the curve from the high suspension bridge. One well-bred Englishman among a chattering, shoving crowd of natives. But no one shoved

Mr. Despard, the two scarlet-coated chuprassies saw to that. One curious white-turbaned man who came too close got a vicious dig in the ribs for his pains, and went staggering off, sputtering.

"Ah, there they are!" In his excitement Mr. Despard spoke out loud. He had seen his sister step down from the open door of a compartment.

"Well, Madeline," he went forward and kissed her affectionately.

"Here are Flavia and April," said Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling flustered and inclined to cry.

"Hallo, Uncle Arthur!" said Flavia, and oddly enough the sisters said it together.

"My Sam, which is which?" gasped Mr. Despard. He took each niece by the hand. "Don't bother about the luggage, Madeline, the chuprassies will do all that. Come along out to the car." He led the way. The three travellers followed him, staring round them excitedly. All so frightfully interesting, thought April, drinking it all in. The crowded platform and everyone so oddly dressed, and the queer smell of it all. So utterly different from England, she thought again, standing outside the low station and smelling the acrid smoke that drifted from a little group of natives sitting huddled round a tiny charcoal fire.

"That's it, can you all get in comfortably? I'll sit beside Hassan," said Mr. Despard, shutting the door of the car and walking round to climb into the front seat of the long Sunbeam saloon.

"Madeline, how grand!" April snuggled up against her mother and in the darkness caught hold of her

hand. The car went sliding out of the station compound and out into a wide white road. A large moon hung high in the sky, making it look like clear cool daylight. Away from the station lights April began to see how bright the moonlight was. A bullock-cart ambled along the road, the driver of it sitting on the shafts with his brown legs hanging and a tiny Japanese lantern twinkling from the swaying canvas hood of it. All so mysterious, thought April, gasping a little as the car turned and slid in between two white gateposts and then drew up at a low creeper-covered porch.

And here was welcome indeed. Fazal Khan, in the starchiest of white starched clothing and his venerable beard twitching with excitement, stood at the foot of the stairs salaaming profoundly. The khitmagar, equally spotless, stood behind him. At the top of the steps with her shiny black hair bunched over one ear and also spotless in a snowy sari stood Mitu the ayah. Mitu was bursting with excitement. Three ladies to look after and the pay generous in proportion. She waited there, the glass bangles on her wrists tinkling together as her thin brown fingers clenched and then unclenched.

But directly Mitu's eyes rested on April she knew that she would like her best. To her the sisters were never alike, she could tell them apart at once. Mrs. Metcalfe she respected and liked too. But it was to April she gave all the love of her old heart. It leapt into her eyes now as she stood and salaamed to the three ladies who with Mr. Despard stood on the wide matted verandah and stared at her. Suddenly none of

them knew what to do or say. It was all too exciting, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, remembering the fat letter in her dispatch case and longing to get away to her bedroom so that she could read it.

"Well, what about something to eat?" said Mr. Despard. "Fazal Khan . . ."

"Not for us," said Mrs. Metcalfe swiftly. "We dined on the train. I am sure the girls will like to go to bed."

"Yes," said Flavia, who felt that she wanted to see what her bedroom was like.

"Well, Mitu will take charge of you," said Mr. Despard. "Madeline, you're at my end of the bungalow and the girls at the other. Come along with me. Mitu will take the girls."

"Thank you, Arthur," said Mrs. Metcalfe. She followed her brother along the verandah and marvelled at the luxury and space of it all. Her room was equally large, leading from the verandah with a hanging curtain in the door of it. A small bed stood in the middle of the matted floor, shrouded with a mosquito curtain. Beyond the main room was another, smaller room, in which was a wash-hand stand and dressing-table. And beyond that, down a little stone step was a bathroom, bricked and whitewashed, with a large galvanized tub standing in one corner of it.

"Oh, how perfectly heavenly," exclaimed Mrs. Metcalfe, clasping her hands like a child.

"Nobody else thinks so. We're all grumbling because we haven't got English baths," said Mr. Despard, but he was pleased. Secretly he reflected that Madeline looked twenty years younger than when he had seen

her last. Probably that was because Paul had gone. He was always rather a selfish fellow, thought Mr. Despard mildly.

"I think it's all perfectly lovely," said Mrs. Metcalfe, suddenly feeling that it was most awfully nice to be with someone of her own family. And with someone of her own age, too.

"I'm glad you like it," said Mr. Despard, beaming. "Get the girls to bed and you and I will have a buck in the drawing-room. Fazal Khan insisted on having a fire lit, he said you would be cold."

"It is ever so much colder than I thought it would be," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "Somehow in England one can never imagine India being anything but roasting."

"I hope you've got enough warm clothes."

"Oh yes, heaps," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "You were so sensible about that: you told us exactly what to bring. I won't be half a minute, Arthur, I won't bother to change. I'll just go along and see the girls settled and then come along to you in the drawing-room, if you'll show me where it is."

"I'll show you," said Mr. Despard, leading the way. And a few minutes later he stood and surveyed his rejuvenated drawing-room and felt extremely happy. This cold weather was going to be damned pleasant, he reflected. Two pretty girls like that and Madeline as slim and young as a girl still. They ought all to marry and he might very probably follow their example, he thought. Anyhow it was dull enough being a widower, and he was only forty-six. The point was, whom should he marry? reflected Mr. Despard, running over in his

mind the eligible ladies in the station and dismissing them all as out of the question.

But twenty minutes later his ideas at any rate about Madeline were put to rest. She told him, looking shy and happy as she did so, that she was already engaged.

"Good heavens, who to?" demanded Mr. Despard, feeling suddenly terribly out of it, and forgetting to be grammatical.

Madeline told him.

"H'm, that puts you out of it," said Mr. Despard.

"So is April," said Mrs. Metcalfe after a little pause.

"Good God, whoever to?" exclaimed Mr. Despard, feeling that the cold weather was going to be a failure. He had already begun to look forward to displaying his newly arrived guests at the Wandara Club.

"A Sapper called Ronald Carew," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "She met him on the voyage and fell in love with him at once."

"Accommodating young man. Did he return it at once?" queried Mr. Despard, leaning forward to knock the ash off the end of his cheroot into the roughly tiled hearth.

"No, I'm not sure that he did," said Mrs. Metcalfe slowly. "But that is quite between you and me, Arthur. They seem very happy now."

"Good! well, that's all that matters," said Mr. Despard cheerfully. "When are you going to be married, Madeline?"

"When the girls are," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Then we must bustle Flavia off the stocks," said Mr. Despard, "and judging by the look of her there

won't be much difficulty about that. Is she an amenable girl?" he chuckled.

"Not nearly as amenable as April," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"They both understand, of course, the rigid line drawn between black and white, don't they?" continued the Collector. "I only ask because, of course, here we are very near to Native territory and it was absolutely impossible to keep the young Princes of Kotpana out of the Club. We did our best for years; it never answers to mix the races socially, as everyone who knows anything about India realizes. But Simla interfered, and so we had to alter the rules. The old Maharajah of Kotpana is a dear, everyone likes him, one of the real old sort. Besides, he never comes to the Club. But the two boys have been to Oxford, and I must admit that they are astoundingly Anglicized and also astoundingly good-looking, especially the elder one. I believe their mother was an Afghan Princess, but of course she is purdah. Anyhow, she must have been very fair, because the two boys are. I say boys, but Prince Hernam Singh must be quite twenty-five."

"Oh, I'm quite sure that the girls would understand that they mustn't . . ." Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly shivered, although the fragrant neem wood fire was crackling and sparkling as only a fire on a chilly evening in Northern India can crackle and sparkle.

"I'm sure they would. How do they like their rooms?" asked Mr. Despard, feeling that he had said quite enough and that Madeline, like a sensible woman, would pass it on to her daughters. But it was a subject on which he

felt strongly. Years before, when he was quite a young man, he had had to take action in a case where a Mohammedan had brought an English girl out to India as his wife. Although the difficulty had been to distinguish that she still was an Englishwoman, remembered Mr. Despard, who had had the ghastly task of being one of those to go into the underground cellar where she had been imprisoned for a year by the orders of her mother-in-law. "Get the Collector on to the subject of mixed marriages and you can give up hope of dinner," grumbled a young assistant Collector who had once been overheard to say, after his first month of service, that he thought there was too much fuss made about all this business of black and white.

"They love their rooms," said Mrs. Metcalfe promptly. "And so do I."

"Have a drink before you go to bed," said Mr. Despard flicking the end of his cheroot into the fire and yawning.

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "I never drink anything, Arthur."

"Wise woman," grinned Mr. Despard. "I do, though. Koi hai!"

"Sahib," said a voice instantly. It was Fazal Khan, who came noiselessly through the curtain from the verandah.

"Whisky, soda lao."

"Attcha, sahib," and Fazal disappeared again.

"It's like a play," said Mrs. Metcalfe sitting up in her chair, her eyes shining like a child's.

"I'm glad you think so. It's a play that I could very

often do without," chuckled Mr. Despard, holding out his hand for the tumbler that Fazal Khan, like some white-turbaned Genie of the Lamp, was filling up with whisky. "Draw it mild, Fazal; you don't want to make me tight, do you?"

"Huzoor," murmured the old Mohammedan, putting down the cut-glass whisky decanter and with profound dexterity flicking open a soda and filling up the tumbler with it.

"But you like your servants, don't you?" queried Mrs. Metcalfe, when, with a profound salaam, Fazal Khan had left the room.

"Like them? Rather, I love old Fazal," said Mr. Despard warmly. "But he's one of the old sort, we don't get them now. Here's luck, Madeline," he said, and he drank to his sister, smiling over the edge of his glass.

"Thank you, Arthur," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and her eyes softened and glowed a little as she fixed them shyly on the dying fire.

CHAPTER XXII

THE girls took to India as the proverbial duck takes to water. The next afternoon Mr. Despard conducted them all to the Club, a large rambling old bungalow a good way away from the Civil Lines. He felt a very natural thrill of pride as he stood on the wide matted verandah of it and felt rather than heard the gasp of astonishment that went round the groups of people sitting about in deck-chairs. Heavens! where had he found such girls? Over the bar, tall athletic young men, muffled up in sweaters after fierce games of tennis, talked about it excitedly. The wife of the General commanding the station came up at once to Mrs. Metcalfe and greeted her warmly, and drew Mr. Despard and his party into her already very large circle.

"I helped to make the new cretonne covers for the Collector's bungalow," said Mrs. Forrester mischievously.

"I know you did and I simply love them," said Mrs. Metcalfe happily. She spoke happily because she was happy. There was something so exhilarating in this crisp dry air. And everything was so new and romantic. And the girls were so happy: Flavia seemed quite different already.

"Do your girls dance?" asked Mrs. Forrester. And then she laughed. "Of course they do," she said, "what

a stupid question. But you know they make me feel quite lightheaded, they are so pretty. And I can't tell them apart, either."

"April is the younger and the one sitting next to her uncle," said Mrs. Metcalfe. Everyone was talking to his next-door neighbour and so no one could overhear what she and Mrs. Forrester were saying. "She is engaged."

"Is she though? I don't wonder," said Mrs. Forrester. "To whom?"

"A Major Carew," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "A Sapper. We met him on the voyage."

"Quick work," laughed Mrs. Forrester. "But that sort of thing often turns out extremely well. What about the other one?"

"She is not engaged." Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly thought how awful it would have been if she had added the word "yet," which she very nearly had done.

"She very soon will be," laughed Mrs. Forrester, turning to smile at Mrs. Metcalfe. She liked her and she was thankful that she did, because in a small station like Wandara even one difficult woman could completely spoil the harmony. Thanks to her own delightful tact things always went very well and there was complete accord between the Civil and the Military communities, which is not always the case. Mrs. Forrester did not know that it was her own tact that did it, but everyone else did, including her husband, who adored her.

"Well, I daresay they will be dancing now: they generally do before dinner," said Mrs. Forrester. She

smiled across at the General, who sat opposite to her with a girl on each side of him. "Charles, take the Miss Metcalfes into the ballroom," she said. "They have begun to dance there. I can hear the band."

"Right-ho," said the General, and he obediently heaved himself out of his wicker chair. Instantly all the other men in the large circle stood up. Like a beautiful conjuring trick, thought Flavia, half beside herself with enjoyment. She could see that everyone thought that she and April were awfully pretty. What a time they were going to have, she thought jubilantly, walking, with the little rather impudent swing that was natural to her, into the ballroom. They stood at one of the high open doors of it and watched. Only about five couples dancing yet, but a very active string band of six Goanese men in white uniforms playing just a little out of tune. The floor was quite good, thought Flavia, standing and rubbing the pointed toe of her grey lizard shoe on it.

"Meredith!" The General made a little upward gesture of his chin, and two young men who up to that moment had been leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room instantly straightened themselves, and seizing their opportunity, came across the polished floor, half sliding and half walking.

"Miss Flavia and Miss April Metcalfe," said the General, feeling extremely pleased with himself and them. "May I introduce Captain Meredith and Mr. Murphy? Miss Flavia and Miss April Metcalfe. Miss April is one fifty-secondth of an inch shorter than Miss Flavia," he chuckled, feeling that he had made

a huge joke. "Otherwise you cannot tell them apart."

"Ha ha!" a little self-consciously the two men laughed. And then the General went away and the four young people beamed at one another. "Come along," said Mr. Murphy invitingly, and he and Flavia floated away on to the well-chalked floor. And April and Captain Meredith followed. And about half an hour later, Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Metcalfe standing in the same open doorway saw that the girls had "arrived." The room was almost full, and apparently the difficulty was to get dances with the two Miss Metcalfes, the crowd round them was so large.

"Your girls are already quite at home," said Mrs. Forrester. "What pretty, pretty creatures they are," she said enthusiastically, feeling suddenly glad that she had no unattached daughter of her own.

"Yes," said Mrs. Metcalfe. But suddenly she spoke a little absently. Ah, that must be one of the young Indian Princes that Arthur had spoken about, she thought. Standing away, right at the other end of the room, staring at the crowd. Yes, he was a magnificent-looking young man indeed. And unless you knew you would hardly know that he was not absolutely white, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, not being able to see the pale soles of Prince Hernam Singh's feet and the little mauve-coloured half moons at the root of his excellently kept nails. Also the queer look on the palms of his slender hands, a look as if some of the colour of them had been rubbed off with too much washing.

"Yes, that's the bother," whispered Mrs. Forrester

as if she had read Mrs. Metcalfe's thoughts. "We did our very best to keep them out of the Club, but it was made impossible for us. And I must say that they behave extremely well," she added. "Both have been to Oxford, and both have excellent manners in public," she added dryly.

"Which one is that?" asked Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly and entirely unreasonably wishing that it was time to go home to dinner.

"Prince Hernam Singh," said Mrs. Forrester. "The elder and, I think, much the better-looking of the two."

CHAPTER XXIII

PRINCE HERNAM SINGH certainly was astoundingly good-looking. Even April thought so, although she kept her thoughts to herself. Rather in the same way that you wouldn't remark on the good looks of your chauffeur, she thought, sitting in a low wicker chair in her bedroom and dreamily watching Mitu threading elastic into her underclothes.

But Flavia was not so reticent. She spent a good deal of time in wandering in and out of April's room and talking to her about one thing and another. The girls now got on very much better than they had done. Flavia had ceased to be annoyed that April was engaged. In fact she was rather glad about it, as it meant that there was no chance of her being eclipsed. Not that it was likely, thought Flavia, enumerating with complacency the numbers of young men who had already called at the Collector's bungalow. Getting the cards out of the "Not At Home" box was like some delicious game, which they played every evening after dinner when there was no one dining with them.

But one day there was a slight gloom over the game. Two cards a little different from the others were discovered. They seemed to smell a little of scent, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, seeing her brother's face cloud.

"Blow the man!" he exclaimed, and laid the cards down on the table again.

"Who is it?" exclaimed April, instantly interested.

"Prince Hernam Singh," said Mr. Despard, and he crossed one neat black-silk ankle over the other.

"Why 'blow' him?" asked Flavia saucily. She and her uncle got on excellently. Almost better than he and April did, because, manlike, Mr. Despard appreciated the streak of devil in Flavia.

"I told you not to dance with the fellow," said Mr. Despard, looking at Flavia.

"I know, but how could I possibly get out of it without absolutely insulting him?" asked Flavia. "He came up when I was standing there all alone. I had to dance with him."

"Not necessary at all," said Mr. Despard.

"Tell me then how I could have got out of it," said Flavia, looking defiant and beautiful.

"You could have simply said that you were tired."

"But I wasn't," flashed Flavia.

"Flavia," it was Mrs. Metcalfe speaking now.

"Well, but it's all so stupid, this idea about people being Indians and because of that being out of things," stormed Flavia. "Look at Prince Hernam Singh; his manners are perfect and he is nearly white, too. He has heaps more to say and says it much more intelligently than either Captain Meredith or Mr. Murphy."

"You say that Prince Hernam Singh's manners are perfect, Flavia." It was Mr. Despard speaking now, and with perfect good-temper. "But you must remember that you have only seen him at the Club. When he

gets back to the Palace he sheds his European clothes and gets into a dhotie and vest. I haven't actually seen him do it, but I am perfectly convinced that he does do it. When I was stationed in Bombay I lived next to a very great person indeed, and he always practically undressed after dinner and sat on the verandah like that. Also, for the whole day, his wardrobe hung in full view on the railings of the same verandah. A little tiresome, his déshabille, when we had a dinner party and wanted to sit on our verandah ourselves," said Mr. Metcalfe, smiling reminiscently.

"Well," Flavia was silenced but still rather defiant.

"Let's see who else has called," ventured April, who always disliked any sort of disagreement.

"Heaps of people," said Mrs. Metcalfe, turning the "Not At Home" box upside down and feeling a little miserable because Arthur had made them so very welcome and it wasn't right of Flavia to argue with him like this.

"Hooray," said Flavia. She and her uncle were on excellent terms really. She smiled at him and harmony was restored.

But in the huge rambling old Palace thirty miles or so away to the north things were not quite so harmonious. Prince Hernam Singh, a fine enough figure in his spotless dhotie and embroidered Indian cotton vest, was sprawling in a long cane chair scowling furiously at his bare feet. His toes were fawn colour and very long and straight. He had just had a very serious argument with his younger brother. Prince Rima was delicate and studious. He spent all his time in studying a wonderful

map of the stars that he had brought out with him from England. A bad sleeper, he would spend a good deal of the night in studying the stars. Flat on his back, out on the marble verandah that overhung the wide river that in the rains was a brown rushing torrent and was now at the beginning of the cold weather a very beautiful silver streak of swiftly running water, he would lie on his simple wooden charpoy with his brown arms folded behind his head and stare up at the dark bowl of blue pin-pricked in little silver points. Life was a dreamy affair altogether to Prince Rima, and because of it his father was fond of him and his mother thought he was a fool. She adored Prince Hernam Singh because he was like what she had been when she was younger, fleet of foot and with bright eyes like a fawn's. Now she was more or less shapeless because she was thirty-seven and had lived the indolent life of the High Caste Hindu woman. But she was still beautiful in a slumbrous heavy way. Her sons went to see her daily, carefully shepherded through the women's quarters by Buria, the Maharanee's old ayah, who had been with her ever since, a timid little almond-coloured girl of fourteen, she had been brought from Afghanistan to be the wife of a man thirty years her senior.

But to-day Prince Hernam Singh had not been to see his mother, he was too enraged. He and his brother had driven back from the Wandara Club in the bright-blue Rolls Royce with the wonderful golden coat of arms on the door of it and had argued all the way. They argued in English: they always spoke it when they were together, having become so accustomed to

it at Oxford. Prince Rima was mildly contemptuous of his brother's infatuation for the beautiful English niece of the Collector. "There will be much fuss and trouble if it is found out," he said, speaking in soft and musical chee-chee.

"What fuss and trouble can there be? I am as good as she is!" retorted Prince Hernam Singh; "And she likes me: I can feel that she does when I hold her in my arms. In the dance, onlee," he added hurriedly.

"That may be so, but you know as well as I do what they feel about us," said Prince Rima. "Have you so soon forgotten that Ball in Eights Week. Eh?" queried Prince Rima, trying to see his brother through the velvety gloom of the interior of the luxurious car.

"He was a damned snob," burst from Prince Hernam Singh.

"I do not see it," returned Prince Rima. "Do we like to see our women in the arms of the English gentlemen? No, we do not, and in the best Hindu families it is not permitted. Then why expect Murdoch sahib to have liked it," queried Prince Rima, remembering quite well the face of the young Oxford undergraduate who, on finding his sister sitting in a shaded alcove with his brother, had quietly and very definitely removed her.

"It was an insult," stormed Prince Hernam Singh, who had never forgotten the incident and hated to be reminded of it.

"I cannot see it," returned Prince Rima again. "We expect all and give nothing in return. Have we not our own women and as many of them as we require? Then

why wish women of another race? They do not desire ours."

"You're such a damned fool," muttered Prince Hernam Singh. "You have no spirit. You sit calmly by and see your own people despised and crushed."

"I sit by and I hear plenty tomfool," retorted Prince Rima. "All this Gandhi and this what not! And who did he have to operate upon him when he had appendicitis in the Poona Hospital? Eh? An English surgeon. And for why? Have we not plenty Indian surgeons in our own country? Eh?" Prince Rima made a strange sound of derision in the back of his throat, and sitting far back in the seat of the car declined to speak any more.

So that was the end of that discussion. But later on in the evening Prince Hernam Singh, in his own room, brooded over it. His room was luxurious, as luxurious as his brother's room was austere. He had a wide, low bed made of walnut wood and all the furniture in the room was of walnut wood, too. The bed was covered with a vivid silk coverlet, and had seven or eight silken cushions piled on it. There were four long gilt mirrors in the room. The floor, which was of marble, was spread with priceless Persian rugs. Out of the main room there was a dressing-room and beyond that a marble bath-room with the bath sunk into the floor. Fortunately for Prince Hernam Singh he did not have to witness the filling of the bath, or his æsthetic senses would have been shocked. Water was brought from the kitchen in kerosene oil tins by a perspiring menial. With the exception of a few rooms furnished in English fashion

for her darling by the orders of a doting mother, the Palace was a typical Indian building, full of dilapidated furniture that, in an English household, would have been put aside for the next rummage sale. The Maharajah of Kotpana was now an old man, and when he was young had been a great hunter and had not cared for show and lavish expenditure. He had often regretted having sent his sons to Oxford, and had only done it because his favourite wife ruled him with a rod of iron. He liked the British, and got himself into serious disfavour because of it. His happiness was centred in his younger son. They studied the stars together and often had in Hana, the old astrologer, to consult with them. Prince Rima, who knew much more about the subject than both the old men put together, would nod wisely and appear to agree with them. And then tactfully and often in the form of artless questions he would instil knowledge into them. The life in the Palace for father and younger son was peaceful. The days passed quickly, and no one troubled to think of the time when the old Maharajah would be no more and his eldest son would reign in his stead.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUT the Maharanee thought of very little else. To begin with, she hated the British and thought her husband grossly tolerant of them and their arrogance. One of the first things she was going to do when the Maharajah died was to take away the Club bungalow from them. It belonged to the Maharajah, who had graciously handed it over to the Collector of the station, when, many years before, it came to his ears that a building for a Club was greatly desired by the European community of Wandara. The Maharanee did not know that it had been legally handed over to them; that had been tactfully arranged by the Collector himself, who knew from experience the haphazard methods of the Indian.

"Kotpana's all right, couldn't be better," as he had said to his attentive assistant. "But he's got two boys of eight and nine. In eleven or twelve years time they'll be advanced Nationalists probably. We'll guard against it by tying the old boy down, because he's perfectly agreeable to have it all pucca. He said so himself. I sounded him, as I should hardly have liked to suggest it. Of course he's worth lakhs, we all know that."

And then, some years later, came the difficult question of admitting the Maharajah's two sons to the Club. The Maharanee, squatting on her low divan in strict

purdah, heard it all. Was not the Hindu Club babu of Kotpana State a relation of the Prime Minister? Every word was detailed to the Maharanee. She sat and listened and ground her still beautiful teeth. And although it was settled in her sons' favour she never forgave or forgot the fact that there had been hesitation about it. And now there was more news to retail to her. The old ayah, her wrinkled face and clawlike hands alive with interest and gesture, told the mistress about the two beautiful miss sahibs who had come from the Vilayet. Beautiful as stars they were and with a gracious lady mother. And the more beautiful of the two sisters, who were as alike as the two middle pearls of the gracious Highness's necklace, had cast eyes of favour upon His Highness Prince Hernam Singh.

"How do you know?" asked the Maharanee, and her eyes shone and burned in their dark sockets.

"I know," returned the ayah comfortably. "I know all that concerns the sahibs and memsahibs at the Wandara Club."

"Does he return her love?" asked the Maharanee cautiously.

"Hari babu states that things are difficult for them," continued the ayah. "Favour is not shown to free communication between the races at that Club."

"Don't I know it?" hissed the Maharanee, but she clothed the furious words in her own language. Behind her pale olive-coloured forehead her brain worked furiously. Her son to cast his eyes upon an English Miss. Very good so far as it went. But should he desire marriage with her: no, a different thing altogether.

How should he get his desire without it? The morals of the British were strange and unaccountable. To an extent her sons had absorbed just a fraction of it. For instance, Prince Rima's pale little child wife had borne him no heir. In fact she had not had any child at all and she had been married for a year and a half. The Maharanee was all for the river and a quiet night when the crocodiles would be about on the sandy banks of it. But Prince Rima, who did not care for his wife much because it had been an affair entered on in childhood in the orthodox Hindu fashion, had, for him, become violently excited. Had said strange things about applying to the police if anything happened to his wife. So the Maharanee had had to give up her idea of getting rid of her terrified little daughter-in-law. And Rima, who under his inoffensive exterior had a good deal of determination, removed her firmly from his mother's vicinity. The Palace was large, there was room for her elsewhere, he intimated, when his action was objected to. But Rima was one thing and Hernam Singh was another. The Maharanee sat and brooded all that day and most of the night. She too slept on a wooden charpoy in a room plain to austerity. But no part of it was open to the stars.

All was hermetically sealed, in case the Maharanee might breathe the deadly night air. What more deadly? thought old ayah, going round every night when her royal mistress lay completely covered up with a brightly coloured rezia and stuffing every loophole up with little bits torn from a disused gunny bag.

CHAPTER XXV

MEANWHILE a few miles to the extreme west of the Palace the atmosphere was almost electric. Miss Baker had carefully not told Mrs. Metcalfe that the Mission to which she belonged was practically next door to Wandara. But it was. So anxious was Miss Baker that Mrs. Metcalfe should not know this fact that she had delayed her departure from Bombay by nearly ten hours. She had taken the night train to the Punjab instead of the one at noon. So Mrs. Metcalfe, shaking hands with Miss Baker on the wide and rapidly clearing deck of the *Formala*, had no idea at all that she was soon to be a near neighbour of hers. And why should she have known? thought Miss Baker a little bitterly. The Mission ladies did not mix with either the military or the civilian population of Wandara. And for the first time in her life Miss Baker was glad of it, feeling very strongly that after what had happened it was certainly very much better that she should not meet any of the Metcalfe family again.

But when at last she was on shore, she felt unaccountably desolate. To begin with, the uninterrupted association with people of an entirely different outlook to her own had unsettled her. There were other things in life than native converts and embroidery on Indian muslin; Miss Baker had suddenly become aware of it.

These people who dressed beautifully and made the very best of the bodies that God had given them were not altogether selfish either. There was strong love between them. They thought of others. Mrs. Metcalfe was devoted to her daughters. That was beautiful and what God would approve of, thought Miss Baker anxiously. And yet, although she was five years older than Miss Baker, Mrs. Metcalfe took a keen interest in her personal appearance. Before the ship had reached Bombay she had had her short hair washed and beautifully set in waves. She came up on the last morning trim and dressed in perfect taste. While Miss Baker, who unfortunately saw herself in a long mirror at the foot of the main deck staircase, saw herself drab and uninteresting to a painful degree. She was going down to breakfast and had therefore not got on a hat. Her pale mouse-coloured hair stuck out over her ears in wisps. Why should hair sticking over one's ears in wisps make one look so unspeakably dowdy, thought Miss Baker, feeling suddenly furious and miserable because of it and because it reminded her of the other four women whom she was soon going to meet and live with for another four years. So she got off the ship feeling rebellious. And the rebellion grew as she drove into the Fort in a disreputable ticca ghari. The driver of it sat curled up on the shiny American-cloth seat with a brightly coloured duster twisted round his black cap. He slashed ceaselessly at his horse until Miss Baker, in high-flown Hindustani, told him to stop doing it. Whereat he desisted, because he could tell from Miss Baker's command of the language that she would not

be above reporting him to a European constable if he didn't.

Eventually arrived at the Bombay Branch of the Church and Commercial Stores, Miss Baker got out. Her luggage had gone on to Victoria Terminus with one of Cox's agents. All she carried was her bag, and it was unusually full of money, because her brother, unknown to his wife, had been generous to his sister, of whom he was fond. Miss Baker had twenty pounds with her and nothing particular to do with it because her train fare was paid by the Missionary Society. To begin with, she decided that she would have a good lunch. You could get a good lunch now at the Church and Commercial Stores. Miss Baker had it, sitting under a fan and enjoying herself. She then had coffee and enjoyed that. And then she sat back in the comfortable wicker chair and wondered what it would be like to be pretty and well dressed and have a man to take care of you. Strangely her thoughts wandered on. Mrs. Metcalfe was five years older than she was and had borne two children, and yet she now had another man who loved and wanted her. Why? Because she had taken pains to keep herself attractive, thought Miss Baker, who knew it was no use dodging the fact. Things like personal appearance counted a great deal when you were older. Men did not mind so much when you were young, but they did when you were older. So were things like unselfishness and charity and self-effacement important, and afterwards, when they had got to know you better, men loved those most. But at first they had to be attracted. There was nothing evil about it after all,

thought Miss Baker, sitting with her eyes shut and feeling the cool air of the fan stirring the dowdy wisps of hair over her ears. Why then in the Mission Community of which she formed a part was physical attraction thought wrong? Why was anything to do with your body and the natural longings of it classed as sin? How would the world go on if it wasn't for the natural longings of one's body, thought Miss Baker, keeping her eyes shut because this thought was so really alarming.

But later they materialized into action. Afterwards Miss Baker wondered if she had been to sleep and had derived strength from that sleep. But the fact remained that when she arrived at Victoria Terminus at a quarter past six o'clock (the Stores shut at six and she had had to leave before that) nobody would have known Miss Baker but herself. The long glass in the delightful retiring-rooms at Victoria Terminus showed somebody quite different. And yet she still had five pounds left in her bag, thought Miss Baker, clutching it.

By the time she arrived, early in the following evening, at the low thatched bungalow in the big compound surrounded with little whitewashed buildings, she had almost forgotten that she had ever looked different. Only old Andrew reminded her of it for an instant when he had looked past her on the sunflooded platform of Wandara Station. And then he had recognized her and, native-wise, had given no sign of the surprise he was feeling.

"Salaam, Miss Sahib," he had said, and had taken her hatbox from her neatly gloved hand.

"Salaam, Andrew," and from under her daintily camouflaged solar topi Miss Baker had shown her nice teeth in a pleasant smile. Her teeth were to Miss Baker, now, a source of intense satisfaction. Both the other ladies in her cabin had had plates, although they had made desperate efforts to conceal the fact.

But her reception at the Mission bungalow had shown her that her change of dress was not approved. The three other missionaries had been sitting on the verandah having tea when she arrived. Just the same spindle-legged table and hand-crocheted d'oyleys underneath the limp bread and butter. The same thick crocheted lace round the bluey-white table-cloth. The same lifeless kiss on her flushed face from all three women. And yet they were frightfully good, thought Miss Baker, standing and feeling acutely conscious of her pretty hat. Why then must extreme goodness always go hand in hand with such intense lack of feminine charm? Why must you always know that a person was a missionary just by looking at her? pondered Miss Baker, who had made several voyages and because of her excellent hearing had very often suffered very much.

But the storm did not burst until after dinner that night. The nights were cold and Miss Baker had provided against them. Evening dress for her would be ridiculous, she knew; to begin with, her arms were thin and her wrists rather bony. But the English assistant at the Church and Commercial Stores, gazing at the queerly dressed lady with the beautifully shaped head covered with short well-waved hair, had known

exactly what would suit her. It had been ordered out from home for a customer and had not been required because the lady's husband had been transferred to Bombay, where such a garment would of course be impossible. But it would do for Madame: the assistant went hurrying off to fetch it.

And it was so ridiculously cheap. For a velvet coat lined with *crêpe de Chine*, a short pleated *crêpe de Chine* skirt and two befrilled oyster-coloured *crêpe de Chine* blouses to go with it, only 175 rupees. Miss Baker made a swift calculation. A little over eleven pounds. Well, well worth it. A blouse like that at home would cost quite four pounds, thought Miss Baker, who had seen some very much like it in a little shop near Swan and Edgâr's and had only refrained from buying one because she knew how wrong it would be. A form of self-indulgence, thought Miss Baker, scurrying across the road in such a hurry that she had almost been killed by an advancing taxi, the driver of which had first scowled and then sworn at her. And now she sat at the sparsely decorated dinner-table in the bare dining-room of the Mission and felt that the other three women were thinking of nothing but her hair. They were; but brightly, after the manner of their kind, they were trying to behave as if they were not. It was not until after dinner that Miss Weaver, the eldest and most authoritative of the ladies, asked her to come into her room for a little chat. "I have a moment before evening prayers," she said. "And if I am late will you take them, dear?" she said, turning to Miss Proctor, who came next in seniority.

"Yes, dear, I will gladly," said Miss Proctor brightly.

Miss Weaver's room was like all the bedrooms in the Mission bungalow, very high and bare. But need they be so cheerless, thought Miss Baker, noting the thick cotton cover to the dressing-table and the plain hair-brush with its shiny wooden back. And the queer little china pot into which you were supposed to tuck away the long hairs that came out on the brush. Such a disgusting process, thought Miss Baker, feeling suddenly thankful that it would not be necessary for her any more. At least, not to such a depressing extent.

"You have changed, dear," said Miss Weaver quietly. Miss Weaver was a good woman and a kind one.

"Yes, I know I have," said Miss Baker. "But not inside. At least, not much."

"I am glad of that," said Miss Weaver. Her desiccated femininity recoiled from putting into words what she was feeling. Namely, that there must be a man mixed up in all this.

"Are you engaged, dear?" she ventured after a little pause.

"No, I wish I was," said Miss Baker, and her nice teeth suddenly shone in the lamplight.

Miss Weaver was a little shocked. But she did not show it. She waited for Miss Baker to go on. Margaret Baker had always been the impulsive one of the little community.

"I have got tired of always looking so dowdy," said Miss Baker. "I think I have learnt a good deal on this last voyage, as I travelled first class and with exceptionally charming people. There is no need for

missionaries to make such objects of themselves," she blurted out.

"I see you have discarded your pince-nez for tortoiseshell spectacles," went on Miss Weaver, staring at her colleague.

"Yes. I went to Laurence and Mayo on my way to the Station and they had exactly what suited me," said Miss Baker. "There is nothing really wrong with my eyes, at all and my pince-nez seemed suddenly to begin to pinch my nose. In fact, the Englishman in Laurence and Mayo's tested my eyes and said that I was mistaken in wearing my glasses all the time. And why did I?"

"And what did you reply?" asked Miss Weaver mildly.

"That I always had done," said Miss Baker.

"I see," said Miss Weaver. She pondered. "Attention to dress and to one's personal appearance has always the tendency to distract one from the eternal verities," she said. "That is why we missionaries have to be so specially careful. That nothing may cause our feet to waver on the narrow path."

"Yes, but why are our feet so uncertain on the narrow path?" persisted Miss Baker. She impulsively took off her large spectacles and laid them in her lap and her round blue eyes looked short-sightedly at Miss Weaver. "And after all, are we so terribly sure that we know what the eternal verities are?" she said. "All of them, I mean. Mayn't there be some others? Things like. . . ."

"Well?"

"Things like wanting to look nice because God made our bodies," faltered Miss Baker.

"Bodies," said Miss Weaver. She disliked the word "body." For years she had barely remembered that she had one. Only an unusually severe attack of malaria would remind her of the fact.

"Yes, there's nothing wrong in a body," said Miss Baker stoutly. She passed her tongue quickly round her mouth, remembering that all her teeth were her own and feeling renewed gladness because of it.

"Our body is only lent to us," said Miss Weaver. "And it is the Temple of the Holy Ghost."

"I know. All the more reason why it should look nice," said Miss Baker, feeling that she had scored and that Miss Weaver would be angry because of it.

But Miss Weaver was not angry. In fact, she was too troubled to be angry. Miss Baker was a very active and efficient missionary and therefore was valuable to the community. Otherwise she would have at once taken steps to get her transferred. She thought hurriedly as to the best thing to say.

"Don't forget that we have a very high standard to maintain because of the Indian women we deal with," she said gravely. "After all, you know as well as I do what is their besetting sin."

"I know, and I think that they carry it to excess," said Miss Baker quietly. "But after all I think that they are more natural than we are. We deny all our natural desires until we haven't got any left and think it is virtue. I only call it stupid. If we confessed that we longed to be loved and cherished and have children,

and admitted that we had missed the best in not having these things, I think there would be some sense in it. But as it is I think it is only stupid," said Miss Baker.

And remembering the terrible affair of the young Baptist missionary and a member, at least a departed member, of this very community Miss Weaver thought it was better to say no more. At any rate not just then, she reflected, kissing Miss Baker's hot cheek and murmuring something to the effect that she must be tired and would like to get early to bed.

But half an hour later Miss Baker, lying in her narrow wooden bed with the unbleached cotton webbing of it holding up her spartan mattress and the well-washed and rather shrunken mosquito net shutting her in to something like an oblong meatsafe, thought very hard indeed. Her values were alarmingly reversed somehow. But one thing still stood firm, namely that Someone, somewhere, cared most desperately for you and wanted you to be happy. Never once could Miss Baker remember any single instance in the New Testament—and Miss Baker knew her New Testament very well—where Christ condemned joy. He always encouraged it if He could. Therefore why this continual gloating over life being such a hard and dismal thing? Was it perhaps that we helped to make it a hard and dismal thing ourselves? wondered Miss Baker, beginning to feel the advent of that soft misty sensation in her head that heralds the approach of sleep: and glad of it because she was extremely tired.

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CHAPTER XXVI

CHRISTMAS suddenly began to come rather near. How quickly the time in India went, thought April, especially if you were enjoying yourself so frightfully. Because she was enjoying herself. Unknown really to anyone but her mother, she kept up a very delightful and frequent correspondence with her lover. They were getting to know one another through their letters—at least Ronald was getting to know April. She wrote very attractively and spontaneously. He had already entirely got over his infatuation for Flavia and was beginning to think that he had done a wise thing in holding on to this child who adored him. It made life much more interesting to have someone who adored you, thought Ronald, lying at full length in a deck-chair, having his riding-boots taken off by his bearer and reading a letter from April at the same time.

The postscript made him stop and think. April had left it to the very last to say the thing that was filling her heart and mind to the exclusion of everything else. "Uncle Arthur has suggested that you might like to come here for Christmas," she wrote. "But I expect you would not care to come really. It was only an idea."

But a very nice idea, thought Ronald Carew, thinking it over all that evening and the next day. And then the following evening he wrote, sitting under the tall

standard lamp with the big blundering moths flying round the shade of it. He wrote interestingly, describing his daily life and feeling as he wrote that it was jolly to know that someone really cared what you were doing. His mother used to care, but she was dead, and Ronald missed her letters more than he had ever admitted to anyone else. He waited until the very end of the letter to put that he wanted to come to Wandara for Christmas. "I can get ten days' casual leave easily and I shall love it," he wrote. "Why not? Don't you suppose that I want to see you again?"

April got the letter two days later. In the evening, she had found it on her dressing-table when she came in from the Club. She was sitting reading it now, with ayah putting on her stockings. Mitu insisted on putting on April's stockings, and would hold her small feet in her wrinkled hands and squeeze them softly before she began.

"Mitu, you had much better go and see if the mem-sahib wants anything." Sometimes ayah's attentions became rather oppressive and April would try gently to get rid of her.

"I want something. Ayah never pays the slightest attention to me," said Flavia, who had walked silently in through the swaying curtain from the next room.

"Take her, then," said April. Her gold hair shone under the electric light.

"Is Ronald coming for Christmas?" asked Flavia.

"Yes," said April, who had finished the letter and was folding it up,

"Good," said Flavia, who was far too occupied

mentally with her own affairs to bother about Ronald Carew. She had had two proposals and was now considering a third. And in between them there was all the excitement of Prince Hernam Singh's passion for her. Although that had to be awfully carefully managed. But it was possible. On the various moonlight picnics and expeditions to distant lakes and caves and all the gaiety that makes up the life of an upcountry Indian station in the cold weather Prince Hernam Singh was generally one of the party. He had to be, the Civil and Military communities in the station had faced it. His brother generally refused to come. But Prince Hernam Singh would arrive in his Rolls Royce two-seater without a chauffeur, and the big Rolls Royce with a chauffeur in case it was wanted, and you couldn't always insult the fellow to his face by declining to allow him to take a lady in his own car with him, said the General, who disliked social intercourse between the races as much as anyone. But as it was now not only encouraged but practically insisted upon by Simla the only thing was to lump it, said the General, feeling thankful that that young minx of a Flavia Metcalfe would always throw herself into the breach and save what might very often have been a very difficult situation. So Flavia was quite content. She always felt a little contemptuous of April's placid love affair. It wouldn't have contented her, she thought, standing and eyeing April as she sat patiently enduring the ayah's adoring ministrations.

"How you can let her squeeze your feet!" she said suddenly.

"It makes her happy," said April.

"I know, but that sort of thing is so maddening," said Flavia impatiently. "Besides, I want her to pin up my petticoat, it's too long."

"Buss, ayah," said April gravely. She had made a certain amount of effort to master a few words of Hindustani.

"Attcha, baba." Mitu, who had been fully conscious that Flavia was impatiently waiting for her and had therefore lingered over what she was doing, got back on to her heels and stood up.

Flavia stood and chatted while ayah attended to her petticoat. Ayah did not approve of pins: she brought April's little Singalese workbasket and abstracted a darning needle from it, threading it with white silk. Armed with this she squatted on the floor.

"You'd better marry Ronald soon," remarked Flavia inconsequently. "Mother's engaged and I easily could be if I wanted to."

"Oh, Flavia, who to?" April's quickly flushing face was raised.

"Either to Mr. Murphy or Captain Meredith," said Flavia.

"My dear!" April was silent. Although by now quite used to the idea that her mother was going to marry Mr. Maxwell, she could never remember it without a little pang. Although she knew that she was selfish, because Madeline was obviously terribly happy.

"As a matter of fact I far prefer P. H. S.," said Flavia guardedly, making signs and winks to show that ayah must not know whom she was talking about.

"Not . . . ? "

"Yes."

"But . . ."

"Promise you won't tell Mother what I say."

"You know I shouldn't," said April rather indignantly.

"Thank you, ayah," said Flavia gracefully. "Tell her that Mother wants her, April; you can say it better than I can."

"Ayah, memsahib kepas jao,"¹ said April fluently.

"Attcha, baba," said ayah, and padding away down the matted room she put the little gaily coloured basket back on to the top of the chest of drawers and vanished.

"What's the violent objection to P. H. S.?" said Flavia, sitting down on the end of April's bed, that gave forth a violent squeak.

"I don't know. It's just that he's . . . " April failed for a word.

"That American girl married the Maharajah of Somewhere and nobody cared," continued Flavia.

April was silent.

"You couldn't sleep with a black person," she said after a little pause.

"I shouldn't marry a person to go to sleep with him. I should marry him to be kept awake because he loved me so," said Flavia grandly.

"Flavia!" Even April's neck was scarlet.

"Well, people like you make me so cross," said Flavia. "You're so half alive. I believe that's why I like Indians best. They do feel things, anyhow."

¹ "Ayah, go to memsahib."

April was still scarlet. "There are other things than that in being married to a person," she said.

"Yes, I know, money," said Flavia. "Prince Hernam Singh is frantically rich. Altogether they have three cars, and two of them are Rolls. When he and his brother go to any sort of party they wear ropes and ropes of pearls round their necks and emerald clasps in their puggarees. Of course the old Maharajah is frightfully old-fashioned and hardly ever spends anything. But when he dies and Hernam Singh ascends to the gādi he is going to have it all different. . . Much more modern. Probably he would spend most of his time in Paris and let Rima carry on instead of him. He hates India and would much rather get out of it."

"You don't mean to say that Prince Hernam Singh has actually asked you to marry him?" gasped April, appalled.

"Yes, he has. At that last picnic of the Forresters," said Flavia complacently. "That's why we were so late. He asked me in the car, and of course we had to stop it and we forgot the time."

"Flavia!"

"You promised that you wouldn't tell anyone," said Flavia warningly.

"I know."

"Not Ronald, either."

"All right," said April wretchedly. Then she hesitated. "How do you know that he hasn't got another wife?"

"He has, but he doesn't care for her," said Flavia readily. "She is only thirteen and whenever she sees him she cries. So he is too fed up with her to bother.

Besides, she cannot read or write. He says that after Oxford and the people he got to know there he can't stick it."

"It seems to me to be too fearful for words," said April, and she got up and walked over to the tall teakwood wardrobe. "You can't marry a native, Flavia," she said, and she came back without even having opened the door of it.

"Can't I? You wait," said Flavia mysteriously. "Only promise me: not a word to anyone."

"I have promised," said April, knowing that she had done absolutely the wrong thing in so doing.

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CHAPTER XXVII

RONALD CAREW arrived at Wandara two days before Christmas. Mr. Despard met him at the station and liked him at once. He considered April lucky, he told his sister a little later as they stood and chatted on the verandah while Ronald greeted April in the drawing-room.

In the drawing-room Ronald eyed the curtain that separated him and April from the outer world. He decided to risk it and held out both hands to the girl who stood surveying him so shyly.

"Come," he said quietly.

"Oh, but I . . . !" April flushed painfully.

"Yes, but think of all the letters we have written to one another. Don't you feel that you know me any better because of them?" said Ronald, profoundly amused. And yet as well as being amused his pulses were stirred. Gad, she was pretty!

"I . . ."

"Please."

"Well. . . ." April came a few steps nearer.

"There, now, it wasn't so awful, was it?" Ronald Carew released the girl from his close grasp.

"No." April was solemn and a little pale round her mouth.

"Well, how do you like India?" Ronald had quickly

lighted a cigarette. He threw the match into the brightly burning fire. To see a fire was heavenly, he thought. So absolutely like Christmas.

"I like it," said April, wondering vaguely if he could hear her heart beating.

"Good. I'm glad you liked the ring," said Ronald, after a little pause, twisting his head to blow the smoke away from April and taking hold of her hand.

"I loved it," said April soberly.

"And do you still love me?"

"Yes."

"Really?" asked Ronald, feeling, in spite of himself, a little piqued at April's lack of animation.

"You know I do," said April passionately, and without giving any warning she broke away from him, and bolting through the curtain she brushed past her mother and uncle and fled down the verandah.

"Hallo, what's the matter with April?" said Mr. Despard jerkily, looking over his shoulder and then staring at his sister.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Metcalfe anxiously. Was it already broken off? she wondered. And yet April had been so passionately anxious to have her lover there. So feverish and unsettled until he had actually arrived. And now——

"I'll go and see what she's doing," she said, setting off down the verandah. "You go in to Ronald."

"Right-ho!" said the Collector and he sauntered through the hanging curtain to talk to his guest. A calm fish, he decided as Ronald turned quietly to greet him. Although the line of his jaw showed that he had a

will of his own. Probably that child adored him and didn't know what to do with herself, thought Mr. Despard. A wonder that he hadn't chosen Flavia while he was about it, though.

Meanwhile Mrs. Metcalfe held April trembling to her heart.

"I adore him so!" gasped April.

"Never mind, so do I adore John," said Mrs. Metcalfe sensibly. "And really good, nice men love to be adored, April. Don't hide it, darling. If Ronald had not loved you very much he would not have come here to stay."

"I want to be married to him and be with him always," gasped April suddenly.

"Yes, I can understand that, too," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply, "only don't say that to him, darling. He'll say it himself if he feels it. After all, you have really seen very little of him yet, you know."

"I wish I hadn't bolted away like that, he'll think it so stupid," said April, finding her handkerchief in her sleeve and wiping her top lip with it.

"No he won't," said Mrs. Metcalfe reassuringly.

"He's not a boy, after all. He'll understand."

"How can I ever go back?"

"With me," said Mrs. Metcalfe placidly. And a few minutes later she stood and chatted to Ronald with April beside her. And then Flavia came in and Ronald shook hands with her, and glanced at her and wondered how he had ever thought that she was the prettier. Even in the short time that he had seen her she had altered. Harder. More reckless. What had she been up to? wondered Ronald, following his host down the

verandah to the room that was to be his. A nice room, large, with a big bathroom and dressing-room leading out of it. His Goanese servant, Robello, was already unpacking his suitcase.

"Rather colder than Bangalore, Robello?" Ronald was brushing his hair and looking at his hands and deciding that they wanted washing again. He had done his best with them in the train, but it had been a poor effort.

"Yes, sar." But Robello had got an extremely nice warm suit for this expedition, so he did not mind.

"Ever been in this part of the world before?" Ronald had finished washing his hands and had come back into the main room.

"Yes, sar. My once servant in Palace of Maharajah of Kotpana," said Robello. "Very miserable service that. Very much villains all other servants," said Robello ominously.

Ronald concealed a smile.

"Really? I had no idea that you had been so far north before," he said.

And then he forgot about Robello and thought that he wanted to see April again. There was something so absolutely new about her, he thought, walking out of his room on to the wide verandah. Gad, it was lovely to feel this sharp upcountry cold again. It simply made you feel as fit as a flea. He found April sitting alone and rather timorously on the wide sofa in the drawing-room.

"Darling," he said, sitting down beside her.

"Ronald."

"Well, sweetheart?" said Ronald, feeling a little

surprised at the ease with which endearments rose to his lips.

"Madeline says that it doesn't matter showing you how much I love you," said April, and she turned earnest eyes on him.

"Matter, why should it?" Ronald turned a little on the sofa. Ah, the door on to the verandah had been half closed, although he hadn't noticed it when he came in. Thank Heaven for it. There was something too ghastly in the idea that a servant might see any sort of demonstration. That had probably been Despard's idea, who had been out here long enough to know the native as he really was.

"Well. . . ."

"After all, we are going to be married, aren't we, darling?" said Ronald, who up to that moment had not given the future anything more than a half rueful thought.

"Yes, I hope so," said April faintly.

"Then . . . ?"

"When I look at you and see you so perfectly heavenly I feel as if I wanted you to kiss me until I was almost dead," stammered April.

"Oh, my child! . . ." Ronald's laugh died in his throat with a little choke. "You heavenly little thing," he said, and he slid his long length a little further along the sofa and caught her into his arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER ten days at Wandara Ronald Carew was much more in love with April than he had ever thought possible. Mrs. Metcalfe saw it and rejoiced, because the whole thing had been much more on her mind than she had admitted even to herself. She went to church on Christmas morning with a song in her heart as well as on her lips. John was in England waiting for her, and he had both cabled and written for Christmas. April, standing beside her lover muffled up in her moleskin coat, smiled inwardly because she could touch him and that made her perfectly happy. Flavia stood and sang rather loudly and looked extremely pretty although a little self-conscious, because this was a Parade service and at least five men would be there who admired her. Mr. Despard stood at the end of the seat and looked soldierly and erect and extremely efficient. The church was full and the soldiers roared the Christmas hymns, standing straight and shiny-headed, their rifles in the little locks in front of them. Everyone felt Christmassy and jolly because the weather reminded them of Home. There had been quite a sharp frost the night before and Kulloo, the Collector's head mali, entirely enveloped in a large brown blanket, was even at that very moment moving slowly about between the little water channels in between the flower beds and gloomily eyeing certain recently planted cuttings.

And even Miss Baker felt an unaccustomed thrill as "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" tingled through the arched roof of the Cantonment Church. She had not wanted to go to this church in case she should see the Metcalfes and their party. But on Christmas Day it was the custom to go there: on that one day their own little Mission Church, where Jamshed, the Native Christian pastor ministered, was deserted by them. Miss Baker knew that either to plead indisposition or refuse to go would disturb everybody, so she decided to risk it. And by one of those strange freaks of fortune, because Miss Baker and her fellow-missionaries were sitting right at the back and the Collector and his party rather near the front, April turned round just before the end of the hymn and, between the heads of a great many people, saw Miss Baker. It was astounding, but it was a fact. Miss Baker, in a very pretty camouflaged solar topi.

"Ronald!" April was whispering excitedly over the high collar of her coat. Her lover inclined his head and felt a little quick thrill of pleasure as his ear brushed the edge of April's soft felt hat.

"Well?" his eyes were amused as he whispered. April always amused him with her sudden ideas and excitements.

"Miss Baker!"

"My hat!" It was time to sit down, so Ronald sat down giving April's hand a little squeeze. That was to keep her quiet, as they could not enter into an excited conversation about it then.

"Madeline." April was whispering on the other side

as well. Mrs. Metcalfe's eyes met Ronald's over her daughter's head. That was partly why she was so entirely happy about this engagement of her daughter's. The same things in April amused them both.

"Miss Baker's in church." Having imparted her news April sat still and tried to think about the sermon. The Garrison Chaplain was tall and manly, and had won the Military Cross in the War. The men liked him because he talked sense and did not waste time about it. The sermon took exactly ten minutes. In eight minutes from the time that he had said "And now" they were all on their feet, the men stiffly at attention singing "God Save the King" as only people who have lived away from England can sing it. And then they were all in the open air, cold and crisp although brilliantly fine. April had broken away from her party and was running. The Mission tonga with the two fat ponies was actually moving off. That must be it; she had seen it once before in the bazaar, although she had not had the remotest idea then that it had anything to do with Miss Baker.

"Miss Baker!" April was breathless. The tonga was moving quite fast as she dashed along the dusty road.

"Who is it?" Miss Weaver spoke from under an old-fashioned topi. "Wait, Andrew," she admonished.

"Attcha, miss sahib." Old Andrew reined in the fat ponies and waited.

"Well, April." Miss Baker got down from the back seat of the well-upholstered tonga. She turned a little apologetically to her three companions. "This is Miss Metcalfe, the Collector's niece," she said.

"Ah!" Officialdom was not by any means dead in Miss Weaver. She smiled. "Speak to her, dear," she said, "there is no hurry, we will wait. Draw in under that tree," she admonished Andrew, and the tonga drew away with its lightened freight, a freight that stared rather enviously after Miss Baker's retreating figure.

"I didn't mean you to know that I was so near." Miss Baker was now speaking to Mrs. Metcalfe, who had taken her affectionately by the hand. Mrs. Metcalfe did not know how much she owed to this quiet woman, who surely had astoundingly improved in personal appearance; yet she was very glad to see her. "But why ever not? I have so often thought about you. Major Carew is here too and will be delighted to see you again. Come along. Ah, here is Arthur. Arthur, this is Miss Baker, who came out with us in the *Formala*."

"How do you do? How does she happen to be here?" the Collector had very nice manners, and he wrung Miss Baker by the hand almost affectionately.

"She is at the Mission here," said April, who had arrived with Ronald and was beaming all round.

"The Mission! Why I know Miss Weaver very well indeed," said the Collector, who often wished, when he heard people running down Missions, that they knew how much useful information Government got out of them.

"So do I know Miss Baker very well," said Ronald, and he took her hand and held it very closely in his for a second or two.

He would like to have gone on to say that as a matter of fact he could hardly recognize her because she was

so much improved in appearance. But he knew that that would hardly do, so he only smiled instead.

"And here is Flavia." Miss Baker had a very pleasant smile. The Collector stared at her and wrinkled up his forehead. He knew that there were four women at the Mission and he thought that he had seen them all. But this one . . .

"Well, I mustn't keep my people waiting any longer." Miss Baker turned a little as if to go.

"Oh, but——" April stared at her mother.

"Why not come and dine with us to-night?" said the Collector suddenly. "Only ourselves, and you will make it an even number."

"Oh, but. . . ."

"Yes, do," urged April and Mrs. Metcalfe, both at once.

"Well——", and Miss Baker hesitated.

"You think that your companions will feel that you're deserting them? No, they won't; I'll make it all right with Miss Weaver," said Mr. Metcalfe suddenly. . . . "Come along back with me: I'll see you into the tonga and explain."

"Oh!" Miss Baker looked frightened and irresolute.

"Come along," said the Collector and he bore Miss Baker off. Ronald stood and watched them. Mrs. Metcalfe and April looked at one another, and then April went closer to her and said something in a whisper.

"Don't be so ridiculous, darling," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she laughed out loud.

"Yes, but he might," persisted April.

"Not at all likely," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and her eyes twinkled into Ronald's.

"What's the joke?" he said, moving nearer.

"April thinks that her uncle might fall in love with Miss Baker," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"He might do a very great deal worse," said Ronald Carew, watching the Collector coming rather quickly up the drive again.

"Then we should all be engaged," said April joyfully. "All, that is, except Flavia, and she could easily be if she wanted to."

"Thanks, I don't want to," said Flavia brightly. But her eyes too were happy and shining, as she wondered what they would all do if they knew that under her frock hung an emerald that would have bought ten engagement rings like April's.

"She's coming to dinner and I'm going to send the car for her," announced the Collector as he came near enough to be heard. "It's only a matter of twelve miles or so and Hassan knows the way quite well. It's out of the question for her to go pounding along in that tonga, she wouldn't do it under an hour and a half. It takes them hours to get in here, that's why they never come."

"How delightful that she's coming," agreed Mrs. Metcalfe warmly. And as she felt April's glowing smile on her she shook her head and twinkled reprovingly.

PART IV
CHAPTER XXIX

PRINCE HERNAM SINGH was really not at all a bad fellow, thought Ronald Carew, when two days later practically the whole station met at the Club for a huge picnic arranged by Mrs. Forrester. The Prince stood there slim and olive-coloured, his height accentuated by the tight Jodhpur breeches that he wore and the flaunting pale blue muslin puggaree that waved out above his well pencilled eyebrows. Ronald did not know that Prince Hernam Singh had put on a puggaree because Flavia had asked him to. He himself passionately disliked the headdress because it made him feel more Indian. But whatever she wished he would do, stammered Prince Hernam Singh, who was more insanely in love with Flavia than he had ever deemed it possible that he could be in love with anyone. He had forgotten about hating the British and that he wished Moscow would be even more successful in India than it already was. He had forgotten that he had laughed with pleasure when, in a little back parlour off Tottenham Court Road a few months before, he had met some of his own caste and heard on good authority that they meant to get the Viceroy somehow. He forgot everything except that Flavia had let him kiss her and had accepted a jewel from him. If she

would only consent to marry him he would clear out of India and leave Rima to carry on in Kotpana. He would take an apartment in Paris and divide his time between France and London. He would have plenty of money even before his father died. The old Maharajah was generous to his sons. He would even give his whole life to spying out plots against the British, thought Prince Hernam Singh passionately, if only he could get this lovely girl for his own. This girl who was an enchanting mixture of flame and ice, thought Prince Hernam Singh, standing leaning against the railing of the Club verandah with a faint sneer on his mouth. He generally sneered when he stood alone amongst English people because he was conscious that they despised him because he was dark.

Although that was exactly what they didn't do, as the Collector was apt to explain to his friends when they sat together over a bachelor dinner-table, the servants withdrawn and the port and Madeira on the table. They despised them because they were so damned shifty and because they didn't know what truth was. Think of So-and-So and So-and-So and So-and-So, went on the Collector, mentioning a few well-known names. Who despises them? No one, simply because they've got the instincts of the white man. "And all honour to them that they have," went on the Collector, "because it must be dashed difficult with their upbringing, Heaven knows."

So Prince Hernam Singh need not have stood with the cold sneer on his face. The Europeans in the station were rather beginning to like him. His manners were

excellent; he did not, for instance, spit out of the window of his car when he was driving with a lady, nor did he do so from the Club verandah. Most of them did, of course, and that was why they were ostracized. It was manners and personal habits that separated class from class and race from race, thought Ronald, watching Prince Hernam Singh with a good deal of interest, because he could see from the sudden straightening of his whole body that he had just caught sight of Flavia.

"Well, how are we going?" Mrs. Forrester, all smiles and energy, was beaming at the people in her immediate neighbourhood.

"I have all my cars here," said Prince Hernam Singh suddenly.

"Oh, thank you so much, your Highness," Mrs. Forrester was always very particular how she spoke to Indians. "That means two Rolls to spare and they will each hold seven easily."

"I am going to take you," said Prince Hernam Singh under his breath to Flavia.

"All right."

"Let all your own party go in one of my cars, and then I shall be sure that they are comfortable," continued Hernam Singh to Flavia, who had gathered strength from her quick acquiescence.

"All right, but I'm not sure that they'll want to," said Flavia, who knew exactly how Prince Hernam Singh and his bright blue cars were regarded by her uncle and mother.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think they think they are too luxurious," said Flavia awkwardly.

"They will be glad of a little luxury by the time we have got to the Dilwoona Caves," said Prince Hernam Singh dryly. "The road is little more than a cart-track."

"Tell Major Carew so," said Flavia, who felt that she would be pleased if her family was riding in one of Prince Hernam Singh's Rolls Royce cars. It would make it easier for her to go off alone with him in his two-seater Rolls, which she was very anxious to do.

"Very well." Prince Hernam Singh walked down from the verandah to where Ronald and April stood together. His movements were sinuous and stealthy like the tread of a wild cat. But his eyes were afraid as he looked into Ronald's blue ones. If this Englishman snubbed him he would give his name also to the little Committee who arranged such things. So easy, especially as far away as Bangalore. A dark night and a bit of wire at the right height from the ground at a time when he would be riding his motor-bicycle home from the Club. And a Socialist Government in power. Probably not even the police would be interrogated.

But Ronald detected the flutter of the long black lashes and felt sorry for Prince Hernam Singh. He did not like Flavia and he felt that they would probably be rather well matched! In any event he did not feel inclined to snub the hail-fellow-well-met efforts at hospitality.

"Certainly, we'll go in your car," he said, "and judging by what I hear about the road to the Caves

we shall probably be thankful for it. We'll all pile in at once."

"I am taking Miss Metcalfe with me," said Prince Hernam Singh and his eyelashes fluttered again.

"Right-ho," said Ronald agreeably. He shepherded April down the verandah and found Mrs. Metcalfe and the Collector standing together. "We're to go in one of the Rolls," he said, "and a jolly good thing too, if the road's anything like they say it is. Let's take Mrs. Forrester and the General with us too: there's heaps of room."

"What about Flavia?" asked the Collector, staring round.

"She's fixed up," said Ronald, remembering Prince Hernam Singh's eyelashes and feeling sorry for him.

"Oh," said the Collector baldly. He thought it was of no use to make a scene then. Flavia had her head screwed on the right way and would keep Prince Hernam Singh in his place. And after all, once having admitted them to social equality, what else can you do but lump it if they fall in love with your women? thought the Collector, putting up his gold-rimmed eyeglass and staring round for the General and his lady.

CHAPTER XXX

THE Dilwoona Caves were a long way away from Wandara. They stood, or rather yawned, from under the overhanging rocks of the Palwa Mountains, queer rocky mountains lying far away to the west of the Kotpana Palace. Prince Hernam Singh pointed out the pointed turrets of his home as they passed near to it.

"Oh!" Flavia was interested and turned to stare out of the window of the luxurious saloon two-seater car.

"I should like to take you to see it. But it would not be possible," said Prince Hernam Singh gloomily, and his dazzling row of teeth showed briefly as he bit hard on his lower lip, thinking of his mother.

"Why not?"

Prince Hernam Singh shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. His habit of long silences intrigued Flavia.

"I should like to see it," said Flavia pettishly, watching Prince Hernam Singh's long olive-coloured fingers on the driving wheel, and wondering how she could tell him that it wasn't the thing to wear a diamond ring on his little finger, however large the diamond might be.

"Don't," said Prince Hernam Singh abruptly.

"Why not?"

"Because you know that it drives me crazy," said Prince Hernam Singh. The long delicate ends of his pale blue puggaree swept Flavia's cheek.

"I'm glad you wore this," she said, softly pulling it.

"I detest it," said Prince Hernam Singh savagely. "You make me wear it to mark the difference between me and the rest of your friends. One of these days I shall stab that Captain Meredith as he returns from the Club on his beastly motor-bicycle."

"You mustn't do anything of the kind," said Flavia, inwardly delighted. How infinitely preferable this was, she thought, to the tame engagement of her sister. There was something mediæval about this. Murders: at least threatenings of murders.

"Moonflower, do not be so cruel to me," pleaded Prince Hernam Singh. His olive-tinted face took on a queer pallor as he slowed down the car.

"Why do you stop?" inquired Flavia, making flagrant use of her beautiful eyes.

"To tell you again that I love you to distraction and that unless I can have you for my wife I shall kill myself," said Prince Hernam Singh simply.

"Yes, but you can't think what a fuss there would be if I even dreamed of being your wife," said Flavia. "It's all very well for you, but you don't understand."

"I do," said Prince Hernam Singh grimly, remembering the ball at Oxford.

"I don't think you do, quite," said Flavia delicately. "Besides, we can't argue it here, the others will be coming by soon."

"No, they will not; we have taken a more circuitous

route," said Prince Hernam Singh. "Although do not be alarmed; Moonflower, we shall arrive as soon as they will, as I know the road well and the car will do an easy seventy-five if I wish it to."

"Oh." And Flavia sat back in the luxurious car and thought that really she did like Prince Hernam Singh very much indeed. There was something ruthless about him that appealed to her. Also his wealth attracted her enormously. She glanced at his slim little finger with the blazing diamond on it.

"Let me try it on," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"The ring on your little finger."

"Certainly," said Prince Hernam Singh, and he took it off. In spite of his passion for this girl he was a shrewd man. She was greedy for wealth and jewels. Of course she was, so were all women, thought Prince Hernam Singh calmly.

"It fits me," said Flavia dreamily, and she slipped the ring up and down her slender finger and looked at it. The setting was poor but the stone was magnificent. It would weigh—what would it weigh? wondered Flavia, taking it off and holding it in the palm of her hand. At any rate it would be worth at least about five hundred pounds.

"No, keep it," said Prince Hernam Singh as Flavia turned to hand it back to him.

"Keep it?"

"Yes, if you care to," said Prince Hernam Singh, who had twisted himself a little in his seat to look at Flavia.

"But . . ."

"Ah, you mean that the giving of a ring might be taken to mean something in the nature of a pledge," said Prince Hernam Singh. "Not so, Moonflower, between you and me. I give it you because I love you."

"Well—but . . ."

"You know what would repay me for a thousand of such rings," said Prince Hernam Singh passionately.

"Yes—but . . ."

"I have told you: the others will not take this road," said Prince Hernam Singh. "Look round: the horizon is deserted."

It was. Nothing but queer twisted cactus hedges close up to the car. To the right, but some way away, a bright patch of green where two natives were working, their dun-coloured puggarees showing only vaguely under the blazing sun. Ahead, the low range of hills towards which they were making. Well, why not? Flavia turned to the man beside her. And as she looked at him her heart sang. This was love, she thought briefly. He was white, white as he could be with his olive-coloured skin. And his eyes—why his eyelashes must be quite half an inch long, if not longer, thought Flavia.

"I know I oughtn't to," she muttered as she yielded to his arms.

"Why not?" Prince Hernam Singh's voice was stifled. The Asiatic does not kiss, as a rule: he considers it a waste of time. But to give him his due Prince Hernam Singh did not class Flavia in the category of the other women whom he had briefly loved and got

tired of. But this—he kissed Flavia with profound passion and an almost profounder reverence.

"That's enough," said Flavia, disentangling herself easily. She was angry because something within her responded to Prince Hernam Singh's passion. She felt a sudden reckless fury with her mother and uncle because they had these ridiculous prejudices against Indians. How did they know what she, Flavia, was like? Ordinary married life with an ordinary Englishman would bore her to extinction. To begin with, she would detest to have any children, so that the great and paramount objection to marriage with an Indian was removed. Then she adored wealth and luxury and this man could give it to her in large measure. She would marry him if she wanted to, decided Flavia, straightening her hat and looking into Prince Hernam Singh's blazing eyes with a long sigh.

"Light of my eyes, I have offended you," said Prince Hernam Singh, and with one trembling hand he adjusted his flaunting puggaree.

"No, you haven't, only it's all so tiresome," said Flavia impatiently. She opened her hot hand, in which the diamond ring still reposed. "I know I ought really to give it back to you," she said.

"Give it back to me and I'll throw it into that cactus hedge," said Prince Hernam Singh dramatically.

Unconsciously Flavia's small fingers clutched the ring closer. What a fearful waste! The rough setting pricked her. She opened them again. "See what it would look like on my engagement finger," she whispered.

"Don't," Prince Hernam Singh's voice was trembling.

"No, but I mean it," persisted Flavia. She slipped it on and held it up close to his eyes. "Ha!" she exclaimed.

Prince Hernam Singh closed his eyes and his long lashes swept his cheek.

"Supposing I did say that I would marry you," went on Flavia. "Open your eyes, it's so stupid to keep them shut."

Prince Hernam Singh opened them.

"Would you take me to Paris and never come back to India?"

"I would."

"Would you give me some money of my very own, because Mother isn't at all well off and I couldn't stand having to ask you for everything?" said Flavia, still staring at the ring.

"I would settle two thousand pounds a year on you, so that when you were tired of me you could go away and still be independent," said Prince Hernam Singh, staring at the winding cart-track of the road ahead of him and thinking that he would somehow have to keep all this from his mother, and how he would be able to do it. Perhaps the Prime Minister would be able to get that old harridan of an ayah who waited on her put down an empty well. There were many in the Palace compound. He would see what he could do about it.

"Well, then, I'm not so sure that I won't," said Flavia ungrammatically. Two thousand a year and Paris! Think of the clothes she could have, to begin with!

"You mean . . . ?" said Prince Hernam Singh, turning.

"I mean that I'll see," said Flavia enigmatically. "Because there'll be a fearful row, you know."

"Moonflower!"

"Don't! It's time we went on," said Flavia briskly. "The thing is to avoid rows now as much as possible. And there'll be one if we arrive long after everyone else."

"True," said Prince Hernam Singh, and he noiselessly slipped in the clutch. The car stole slowly and carefully along the rutty cart-track. Flavia put the huge diamond to her lips and the cold of it made her shiver a little. And then she put it into her little silver bag.

"You did really mean me to keep it, didn't you?" she whispered, and she laid a soft hand on the almost softer one on the driving-wheel.

"I did," returned Prince Hernam Singh, and his dark eyes laughed a little in the sombre depths of them.

CHAPTER XXXI

RONALD CAREW took more elaborate note than anyone else of the way that Prince Hernam Singh clung to Flavia's side during that long day at the Dilwoona Caves. And he made up his mind that she should drive home with him, Ronald. They were to dine by moonlight in the old dak bungalow that belonged to the Maharajah of Kotpana. Prince Hernam Singh had made himself responsible for the champagne, so the General told Ronald in the course of a long conversation. The General knew all about the caves and the old fort on the top of them and the dak bungalow. Also he liked Ronald Carew and he did not care for prolonged picnics, so he rather attached himself to him.

"I say, that's a bit thick, isn't it?" said Ronald briefly. "To accept a man's champagne and then practically to bar him socially."

"But that's exactly what we don't do." said the General. "We would if we could, but we can't. Simla backed up by the Home Government makes it impossible. This Kotpana is our ground landlord, although he has made over the Club premises to us legally. The two Princes went to Oxford. They expect to be received as everyone else in the station is received, and they practically are. My wife provided the food for this show, backed up by Mrs. Metcalfe and a few other women.

And Prince Hernam Singh offered to provide the drinks. Well, one couldn't insult him by telling him to his face that because he was a native one couldn't allow it. That's the sort of thing that starts riots. And we don't want riots when we're not allowed to quell them," said the General dryly. "Especially when there are women about."

"No, we don't," said Ronald slowly. He paused a moment. "My fiancée's sister seems rather keen on him," he said.

"I know, that worries me, badly," said the General instantly. "I haven't said anything about it, of course; one can't."

"I can," said Ronald grimly.

"I wish you would," said the General eagerly. "Although . . ."

"Yes?"

"One would hardly think that the two girls were sisters except for their remarkable likeness to one another," said the General inconsequently.

"No, one wouldn't." agreed Ronald. Not for the first time he marvelled that he had ever looked at Flavia when April was about. Why, the two——

"You'll find it difficult to put your oar in," said the General, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and looking at the burning end of it.

"I know," said Ronald. "But I'm going to do it. I've only got four days more here, too, so I'm going to do it on the way home to-night."

"Good for you," said the General. And a few hours later, as he watched Ronald manœuvring so that Flavia should not go back in Prince Hernam Singh's two-

seater, he made up his mind that if possible he would get that young man on his Staff. It was masterly the way he prevented it.

But Flavia was enraged. "Of course, you must go back with April," she said, and the moonlight shone on her angry face and set lips.

"April's tired of me," said Ronald lightly. "Besides, I want a word with you, Flavia. Meredith says that I can drive his two-seater. Also Prince Hernam Singh does not go as far as we do. It's a pity to take him out of his way so late at night."

"He doesn't care," flashed Flavia.

"That doesn't matter," said Ronald. "Besides, it doesn't look well for you, Flavia, to be driving home with an Indian so late at night, even if he is a Prince. Get in and don't be a little owl."

Flashing a backward glance at Prince Hernam Singh, who stood and looked as if he would gladly murder Major Carew with all the most horrible means at his command, she got in angrily.

But Ronald did not care. He waited until he had got away from the crowded group that still circled round the busy servants packing up the remains of the meal and stowing empty soda-water bottles into their wooden boxes, and then he spoke.

"Flavia, what's all this between you and Prince Hernam Singh?" he asked abruptly.

"What?"

"Don't hedge. You know," said Ronald, and the moonlight shone palely on his determined mouth.

"You mean that he's in love with me?"

"Exactly."

"Why shouldn't he be?" flashed Flavia.

"Because . . ."

"Because he's a native and I'm an Englishwoman," flashed Flavia again. "Say something new, Ronald, I'm sick of hearing that."

"You've heard it before, then?" asked Ronald, steering carefully round a bad bit of road.

"Of course I have. Although no one says it to me straight out like you do. They skirt round it, knowing that I'll take it to myself, which of course I do. It'll end in my running away with him if they're not careful," blazed Flavia.

"You wouldn't contemplate anything so foolish, surely?" asked Ronald, determined that Flavia should not see how greatly her words alarmed him.

"I would. I wouldn't mind a bit," said Flavia. "I like him, in fact I believe I love him really; anyhow I know that he appeals to me far more than people like Captain Meredith and Mr. Murphy do."

"Lor !"

"He does. I hate conventionality, I loathe it," said Flavia. "Something inside me kicks at it. I can't help it, I'm absolutely different to Mother and April."

"Well, go on," said Ronald. The road was clear now. The little Morris coupé ran smoothly along under the stars. Every now and then a little native hut came into sight and one heard the monotonous crooning of a woman at her grindstone. Someone was singing away in the distance, a weird tuneless song. Ronald slowed down a little. They were well ahead of everyone else now, and Flavia interested him enormously.

"He adores me," said Flavia, speaking more quietly. "He gives me enchanting presents. Look!" she fumbled inside the neck of her jumper.

"Mind, I don't like to take my eyes off the road," said Ronald, who was a good driver. "I'll stop in a minute, if you don't mind, to light a pipe."

They stopped. Ronald took the two jewels in the palm of his brown hand. They twinkled in the moonlight. Worth about a thousand pounds, the two of them, he decided.

"Well, if you've got to that stage," he said, and he gave them back to her and began to feel in his pockets for his pipe and tobacco-pouch.

"We haven't. He's only given these to me and asked me to marry him," said Flavia. "I tell you because I trust you. He says he'll leave India altogether if I do and settle in Paris. And that he'll give me two thousand a year of my own, so that whatever happens I shall be independent."

"Whatever happens, meaning——?" said Ronald, pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe with a thoughtful finger.

"That I might get tired of him," said Flavia frankly.

"I see. It sounds too good to be true," said Ronald shortly. "Or, and I admit that this may be the real solution, that he's better than the rest of his ilk."

"He is," said Flavia vehemently.

Ronald drew quickly on his pipe and thought deeply. Why shouldn't this shallow girl marry the man she wanted to? She was greedy to the very marrow of her. Her sex instincts were abnormally developed. She would never settle down to ordinary married life with an

ordinary Englishman. It would also be a solution to a very difficult problem for Mrs. Metcalfe. Both daughters would then be off her hands and she could marry the man she loved. Dressed in European clothes Prince Hernam Singh, with his comparatively fair skin, would look like an Italian. If he knew Flavia at all there would be no risk of children. He suggested this last possibility as he put his finger on the self-starter.

"Oh no, I should detest to have any children," said Flavia promptly.

"Well, then, why not?" thought Ronald to himself, but he did not say so.

They went on a little way in silence and then Flavia spoke again.

"You see, I'm not a scrap like April," she said. "She'd be content with something ordinary. I don't mean anything horrid," said Flavia hurriedly, "and if I say dull it sounds horrid. But I mean . . ."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Ronald, and at the back of his eyes he laughed. He was thinking of April as he had held her in his arms for a brief second or two before they parted. They had lingered at the end of one of the darkest caves. And she had gasped and cried to him to let her go.

"You mean stodgy," he said quietly.

"Yes, that's it," said Flavia. "Nice old Ronald, how jolly of you not to mind."

"Well, we can't all be volcanoes, you know, Flavia," said Ronald placidly. "And if you think that Prince Hernam Singh can keep pace with you in those respects I don't know that the best thing wouldn't be for you to marry him."

"Ronald!"

"But not in a hurry," said Ronald warningly. "And when you do it, it must be very pucca. No running away, young lady, or you'll never see your two thousand pounds a year. Nor a wedding-ring either, unless Prince Hernam Singh is very different from the rest of his race."

"But if it comes you'll back me up?" said Flavia excitedly.

"I will."

"Even if everyone's against it?"

"Yes," said Ronald, dexterously taking his pipe out of his mouth to blow a gust of smoke out of the window.

"And not tell anyone what I've told you now?"

"Not a word."

"You're a brick. Why don't you marry April soon, Ronald?" said Flavia. "I can't think how people stand such long engagements."

"I'm going to. At the end of next month," said Ronald unexpectedly. "April would probably have told you herself to-night, so it doesn't matter forestalling her."

"Good heavens! Whenever did you settle it?" demanded Flavia, very much taken aback at the idea of April being married first. It had always been her idea that she should be the first to go. All the fuss and excitement for her. Because a second wedding was always much tamer than the first.

"We settled it this evening, when we were looking at the caves," said Ronald, beginning to slow down. One had to be careful of the Collector's white gateposts because the entrance to the drive was on a turn.

"English people are always so desperately quiet about everything," complained Flavia, who felt cross and flat.

"Not because they don't feel things, you know, Flavia," said Ronald, and as the little car paused noiselessly at the foot of the steps leading up to the Collector's verandah he let his hands drop from the driving-wheel on to his knees. He hated to feel the contempt he did for April's sister, and yet he simply could not help it.

"I like blazing things. Things that flame all round you and make you frizzle," said Flavia complacently. "Good night, Ronald, and thank you most awfully for bringing me home like this and being so nice about everything."

"Good night, Flavia." Ronald put his finger on the self-starter and the car moved forward a little. The others would be in in a minute or two and Meredith would want his car. It was decent of him to have lent it to him, thought Ronald, getting out and shutting the door of it carefully and going up the steps on to the verandah. Probably the poor brute thought that a word from a future brother-in-law would have effect where his wouldn't. Not a hope, thought Ronald, throwing himself at full length in a long wicker chair. But it was amusing to hear the chit talk. "Things that flame all round you and make you frizzle." He laughed at the back of his throat, and then his eyes grew suddenly dark as he thought of April's little frightened cry when he had last kissed her.

CHAPTER XXXII

MRS. METCALFE was a little alarmed at something that Ronald said to her as, with his suitcase being taken down to the car by Robello, very smart in his pointed tan shoes and a cast-off pair of silk socks of his master's, her future son-in-law, he stood on the verandah and said good-bye to her.

"Don't oppose Flavia, Madeline," he said.

"How do you mean, oppose?" Mrs. Metcalfe cast a swift glance round her.

"No, it's all right, nobody can hear," said Ronald. "I mean what I say. Flavia is a very determined young woman and will get her own way somehow, you may be sure about that."

"Do you mean that Prince Hernam Singh . . .?" Mrs. Metcalfe looked round her again. No, April was quite safely out of earshot in the car.

"I don't know. But I think it looks rather like it," said Ronald. He bent and kissed his future mother-in-law. "The middle of next month, then," he said. "I'll write directly I get back and let you know when I can get my leave for certain. Thanks most awfully for all you've done for me."

"My dear boy, it's only been a pleasure." Mrs. Metcalfe stood and watched the car creep down the drive and out at the white gateposts and felt suddenly

very bereft. April so soon going to be married and she to be left alone with Flavia, terrified every instant of what the child was going to do next. Why shouldn't she have her own lover out here to stand by her? thought Mrs. Metcalfe. And yet—no—Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly felt that it would be childish and silly to send for him. Presently, when April was married and Flavia probably engaged to one of the many young men who hung round her. And then she too would have her heart's desire, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, going away to her bedroom for a long morning's writing because it was mail day.

Meanwhile, in the Mission bungalow about twenty miles away Miss Baker had also made the excuse of having to write mail letters and had gone to her bedroom too. Safely in it, she sat down on the one hospitable chair that she possessed and stared straight in front of her. All the rest of the community were brightly and busily at work, Miss Weaver in the Infirmary visiting the girls who had malaria; one of the native teachers had had rather a sharp attack of it, but was better now. Miss Porter and Miss Greenhill had gone off early to visit distant villages, taking Mr. Jamshed, the native pastor, with them because the Collector had intimated, very firmly, that it was not wise for women to go too far afield alone.

"At any rate, I won't have you going," he said to Miss Baker, and he had frowned down at her from his superior height.

"Why, I'm perfectly all right," said Miss Baker. But she had flushed and quivered as she spoke. By

now the Collector and Miss Baker knew one another rather well. The Christmas dinner at the big white bungalow in Civil Lines had been followed by others—three exactly, in ten days. Twice the Collector had driven Miss Baker back to the Mission himself. Miss Weaver had not been quite pleased about it and had said so to Miss Baker. But Miss Baker had been unaccountably determined.

"I think one can carry that sort of thing too far," she had said, looking really very nice in her black velvet coat and pleated *crêpe de Chine* skirt, as she stood and looked at Miss Weaver, and at the same time strained her ears to hear the Collector hoot as the car turned out of the gate.

"What sort of thing?"

"The sort of idea that because a man pays you a little ordinary attention he may have anything else in his mind," said Miss Baker, staring at Miss Weaver and wondering what she would do if she realized the soundless clamour that was going on in her soul. Ah, if only he would mean something! If this arid desert of a life that stretched in front of her could be turned into something green and fertile and smiling. A word from him would do it in one second. But he would never say that word, thought Miss Baker, remembering him as she had just parted from him: tall and distinguished-looking with his greying hair.

"Well, we won't argue about it," said Miss Weaver, who was at the tricky age of forty-eight, when women sometimes get dreadful flashes of longing for what they have either never had or what they might have

had if they had only acted a little differently. Miss Baker looked strangely younger, she thought, saying good night to her, and going away to her own dull bedroom, where she lay night after night without the remotest possibility of anything nice happening to her, and where she knelt this night and tried to pray and found that she could not because her heart was so full of cruellest envy of Miss Baker.

But now it was Miss Baker's turn to feel envy. April with that charming lover of hers and soon going to be married, Miss Baker had sat and heard all about it in the Collector's delightful drawing-room and had smiled and shown her nice solid teeth and looked really pleased. Flavia, too, surrounded by admirers and only needing to say the word to get her choice of them. Mr. Despard¹ had joked and laughed about it. Mrs. Metcalfe too, really happiest of all, because she was at the age to realize what love from a good and strong man really meant. And she, Miss Baker, foolishly and reprehensibly in love with a man who would never look at her! She sat and stared at her writing-table and the stupid letters that she ought to write. If only she could sit down and tell her brother that she was engaged. Free for ever from the terror of a lonely old age. A lonely old age with hardly any money to keep it going. Dependent perhaps on others. Going out into the next world without ever having really lived in this one. Miss Baker resolutely unscrewed the top of her fountain pen and clenched her teeth as she did so. Her eyes watered as she stared through the softly blowing reed curtains out into the compound. The sun was

blazing on the gravel of it: that was why her eyes watered, thought Miss Baker, taking her dainty handkerchief out of her sleeve and blowing her nose fiercely with it. April had given her the handkerchiefs for a Christmas present, explaining anxiously at the same time that they had been given to her, but that there wasn't any time to get Miss Baker anything, and that she had so many herself that she didn't want them.

And meanwhile, the Collector in his office sat and looked very occupied with files, and signed his name to endless letters that his native clerk laid noiselessly in front of him and as noiselessly drew away, and thought all the time of Miss Baker and of what a fool he was, at his time of life to fall in love with a missionary and not a particularly good-looking one at that. Was it her sturdy independence that intrigued him? Or was it the feeling that the real Miss Baker lay passive beneath a sturdy exterior waiting for the spark that would flame it into life? The point was—and then he forgot about Miss Baker as the native babu padded into the room again. The General Sahib to see him, announced the babu, looking blandly from under his round cap. "Show him in," said the Collector. He got up to greet the General, and then sat down again. The two men surveyed one another across the writing-table and then the Collector spoke.

"I expect you've come to find out if I've heard from Simla about this Red business, Forrester," he said. "I have. And it's what I expected. Until we have something definite to go on no steps must be taken."

"Meaning that when we've all been slaughtered in

our beds, and our women . . ." the General broke off. "God! shan't I be glad when I'm out of this country!" he exploded.

"So shall I. But I don't think it'll come to that," said the Collector quietly. "To begin with, we have two companies of troops here and up to the present the Sikhs are loyal. No, what I am afraid of are isolated cases of sabotage," he said. "It's so easy with native territory so close. Kotpana, for instance. The Maharajah is loyal enough. But . . ."

"You mean the boys?"

"No, I mean their mother," said the Collector briefly. "It's the women that run these things. I have very definite information that she hates the lot of us. Purdah as she is, I bet she knows every mortal thing that goes on in this station."

"I shouldn't wonder," said the General, gazing at the Collector and wondering if he had the remotest idea how people were talking about his niece and Prince Hernam Singh.

"For instance, that woman could very easily arrange to have a couple of sleepers put in front of the Punjab Mail one night," went on the Collector. "Futile, I agree, but it's the sort of thing they love. And on Mail night it might make a very nasty mess indeed."

"Quite," said the General, and wondered if he should drop a hint to the Collector that if the Maharanee of Kotpana got wind that her precious eldest son was in love with an Englishwoman she might make herself very disagreeable indeed. And then he decided that he wouldn't. After all it was no business of his.

"Well, then, I won't bother you any more, Despard," he said and he got up to go. "We'll keep our eyes skinned and hope for the best. And also hope that the present Government will dish itself before it's too late. Although I'm not too sure that the other one is any better where the East is concerned," ended up the General gloomily.

"No, I agree with you," said the Collector. And when the General had gone he sat without doing anything for a little while and his thoughts reverted to Miss Baker. The Mission: it was desperately isolated. He would speak to that stern female, Miss Weaver, about having another couple of chowkidars put on. He might run out that evening after dropping the rest of his family at the Club, thought the Collector, feeling suddenly enormously revived by the prospect of this little expedition.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

IN spite of herself Mrs. Metcalfe was more worried by her future son-in-law's parting words than she allowed herself to admit. She watched Flavia attentively during the two weeks that followed. Certainly she seemed a little excited, but then, that was natural, with April's marriage so near at hand. Because it was really near at hand now. Ronald had written that he could get a fortnight's leave at the end of January. It was now the fifteenth of January, so he would soon be coming again, as they were to be married on the twenty-third and spend their honeymoon at Ooty on the way back to Bangalore.

Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly made up her mind that really to enjoy herself at April's wedding she must have an easy mind about Flavia. If she was wondering all the time whether Flavia was allowing Prince Hernam Singh to make love to her she would not have an easy mind. She would ask her straight out: Mrs. Metcalfe came to this conclusion one morning when April had driven in to the Club to have her hair cut by the Club barber. Flavia was at home, superintending the durzie who sat holding delicate fabrics in his toes at the other end of the verandah. He was making a good deal of April's trousseau, dainty flowered-muslin frocks to wear in the mornings. Also doing little odds and ends

for Flavia, who could not quite stand seeing a durzie only working for her sister.

"Flavia." Mrs. Metcalfe was standing outside the softly blowing curtain that separated Flavia's bedroom from the verandah.

"Come in, Mother." Flavia looked up from her work as Mrs. Metcalfe came in. She was decidedly thinner, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, looking at her and thinking how pretty she was.

"I have something I want to get off my mind, Flavia," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she sat down in a low chair. "I hate saying it because you will probably be very indignant with me, but I feel that I must say it or I can't really enjoy anything. I see you about a good deal with Prince Hernam Singh. There is nothing between you, is there, Flavia?"

"Mother!" the swift interjection gave Flavia time to think.

"My darling, I hate even to have suggested it," said Mrs. Metcalfe miserably, noticing Flavia's cheeks flame and feeling because of it utterly wretched.

"Prince Hernam Singh is an Indian," said Flavia, and she felt for the handkerchief in her sleeve.

"I know. I know it was dreadful of me even to have thought of it," said Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling a swift misery that she should have even put such a thing into Flavia's head. And yet Ronald had said it so definitely.

"I hope you don't think that I . . ." and then Flavia paused. Better not to lie too frightfully, she thought, gazing at her mother.

"Darling, forget that I ever said it," said Mrs. Metcalfe hastily. "Don't let's think about it again. How is the durzie getting on?" she ended brightly. She felt suddenly that she could sing with happiness at this prompt laying of the ghost that had haunted her.

"Awfully well," said Flavia, wiping the little beads of perspiration from her top lip. "Come out and see what he's doing. He's just finished that blue frock of April's, so I've given him my dressing-gown to do."

They stood together and stared at the durzie. Unconcerned he crouched over his sewing-machine, standing on a Tate sugar box in front of him. Monotonously he turned the handle, his queer opaque eyes fixed on the long seam below the stabbing needle.

"They are extraordinary creatures," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she walked away up the verandah again. Now to write some more to John. Her letters had the solid thickness of the letters of quite a young girl. But nothing was too insignificant for him to hear. "Pour out your blessed little heart to me, I love it," he had written, and Mrs. Metcalfe had kissed the strong black handwriting that had said the darling words. She sat down at her writing-table again. Nothing now to spoil her joy in her precious younger child's happiness. "But what should I have done if I hadn't had you?" she wrote tumultuously. "April going, and I love her so. But now . . ." and then Mrs. Metcalfe rested her cheek on her hand and wrote faster than she had ever done before. And a few weeks later John, reading this letter, took off his tortoiseshell spectacles

and stared out in front of him and wondered what a man of his age had done to deserve such happiness. Although she didn't know it yet, he had determined to go out soon and marry her. Once let her get April's wedding off her chest and he would write and tell her so.

So there was nothing but happiness in the Collector's bungalow, because Flavia was happy too, although in a feverish, unnatural way. She had practically yielded to Prince Hernam Singh's entreaties. She would marry him if everything could be properly settled, she had agreed. But meanwhile he must be sensible and not monopolize her too much or everyone would guess. "And then that will be the end of everything," she warned him. "They'll send me home, or Mother will take me away, and then you'll never see me again."

So Prince Hernam Singh agreed. Suffering the tortures of hell, because he knew that there were many other men also in love with Flavia, he agreed. And his mother, the Maharanee, sitting and watching him with still beautiful eyes, when he paid her his daily visit, wondered what had caused his smooth olive-coloured face to sink at the root of his delicate aquiline nose. She must find out. And that would be easy, she thought, getting up from her low charpoy and walking with a soft catlike motion to the curtained doorway that separated her room from the open courtyard where her old ayah sat and dozed in the sun.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

NATIVES have a way of finding out everything, especially if they can count on getting something in the way of hard cash as a reward. And the Maharanee had plenty of crumpled old notes in her painted tin cashbox. The Maharajah, especially in his younger days, had been extremely generous to her. Now they very rarely met. The old man would dream away his days and nights in his own apartments and his only real joy now lay in the long hours spent with his younger son and the old astrologer, poring over Prince Rima's chart of the heavens.

So the Maharanee could do practically what she liked. Old ayah ran here and there and talked and lurked and other people lurked too and got well paid for it, and by degrees the Maharanee found out all she wanted to know. Prince Hernam Singh was desperately in love with Metcalfe Miss-sahib and wished to make her his wife. But nothing definite was to be said about it until the other Miss-sahib had wedded the Pultan¹ sahib. Then all was to be brought before the Collector sahib and Metcalfe memsahib, and, their permission obtained, wedding preparations would proceed.

"And what about me?" The Maharanee, crouched on her low bed muffled in a bright yellow chuddah,² looked like some dreadful animal waiting to spring.

¹ Soldier.

² Shawl.

"Malum nahin."¹ Old ayah, with her withered lips stained with pan, gazed sunkenly at her mistress.

"He will take her to Paris and desert the home of his forefathers. Throw in his lot with the British, who are traitors and scoundrels!" The Maharanee swore horribly in her native tongue.

"Chah!" ayah clucked sympathetically.

"He shall not," whinnied the Maharanee, and she struggled off her low bed and began to rage up and down the room. Her bare feet seemed to stick to the marble and make a little hissing noise as she lifted each up in turn.

"How will you prevent it?" enquired Motlibai, watching her mistress and thinking that she was getting very fat. She remembered the slim, beautiful fawn-coloured child who had come all the way through the Khyber Pass in a low bullock-cart drawn by two beautiful trotting bullocks. The little girl had peered out through the blowing curtains of the cart and marvelled at all the wonderful new country through which she was passing, chattering to her ayah about it. Not so very long ago after all, thought Motlibai, who, in common with all people of her advanced years, spent a great deal of time in musing over the past.

"I shall prevent it like this," said the Maharanee, and she made a sudden swift turn in her pacings. "Like this," and she threw her shawl over her head as she squatted on the marble floor beside her ayah. "The girl is as all females and especially the British female, frail in her virtue. She will yield to my son's demands should he be importunate enough."

¹ "I don't know."

"Continue," said Motlibai, thinking that her royal mistress had made a miscalculation this time.

"She shall be conveyed to my son's apartments by night. Her ayah with her, so that when she is returned no questions will be asked. They will be so thankful to get her back that they will be glad to hush it all up," sneered the Maharanee contemptuously.

"But the British . . ."

"The British are afraid to act," said the Maharanee contemptuously. "They fear the wire-pullers in England and Moscow, it is common talk. Besides, here we are in native territory. By the time they have communicated with the authorities it will be too late. There will be no proof. At least, no proof that the people most concerned will desire to be made public," sneered the Maharanee.

"And then——" continued Motlibai, chewing pan very hard indeed and wondering what the point of all this was.

"Having had his desire he will no longer wish her for his wife," said the Maharanee pointedly, and she heaved herself up from the floor and went padding over to her charpoy again.

"Huh!" said ayah, and remained deep in thought for some moments. And then she raised her wrinkled old face and her sunken monkey eyes dwelt on her royal mistress.

"This will be costly," she said, "and difficult to arrange. I shall be required to be paid in advance. Much much pice for this," said ayah, gesticulating with her skinny hands.

"Fetch me the tin box," said the Maharanee grandly.

CHAPTER XXXV

MEANWHILE every day at the Collector's bungalow seemed to pass more quickly than the last. Ronald arrived, and he and April were to be married in three days' time. The durzie ground at his machine and had so much to do that a *bhai*¹ was requisitioned, and the two men with their huge puggarees aslant sat with their legs curled up underneath them, turning the handles of their machines at lightning speed. Ronald, standing one day gazing at them, raised his head and laughed at April.

"My darling, I shan't be able to find you in the middle of all this," he said, and his senses tingled a little as he saw the colour sweep up to April's white forehead.

"Come away, you aren't meant to see," she said shyly. She led him down the verandah. "Would you mind if I went with Flavia to the bazaar this afternoon?" she said. "We must get some more *crêpe de Chine* and it's the only place where you can. Multan has it; we got it all there."

"I hate the bazaar for you," said Ronald discontentedly.

"Yes, but we go in the car," pleaded April. "Flavia's so frightfully keen on going," she said awkwardly. "I don't want to really, but I sort of promised her."

¹ Brother.

"Will you be back to tea?"

"Oh yes," said April. She hesitated. "You see, I shan't be with Flavia so very much longer," she said.

"Are you sorry?" asked Ronald. There was no one about, for a change, as he thought cynically. He put his hand on her arm and walked with her into the drawing-room. "Tell me," he insisted.

"You know I'm not," said April passionately, and she hid her face on his coat.

"Precious!" said Ronald, and he put his brown hand on the back of her fair head and pressed it against his heart. "Sweetest!" He stooped his head and kissed her soft mouth.

"I love you," said Ronald, and he held her closely to him. And then he let her go. "Mind," he said, "there's someone outside, I heard him. A boxwallah, I expect. I'll turf him out."

But it was not a boxwallah. Only rather a badly-dressed native holding a very dirty envelope addressed to someone else. April from behind her lover surveyed him, and when he had gone spoke ruminatively.

"Why are so many of them so dirty?" she asked. "It's so easy to be clean in India; it hardly costs anything to have your clothes washed."

"They like it," said Ronald briefly. "And now about this horrid expedition to the bazaar. Promise me you won't be long."

"I promise," said April cheerfully. And at lunch, to which they all sat down a little later, Flavia confirmed the promise. "We'll be home to tea," she said, "and

we'll take ayah with us, and do every mortal thing that you want us to do."

"Flavia!" said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Well, but as if it mattered going to the bazaar," said Flavia rather impatiently. "Everyone goes to the bazaar nowadays."

"No, that's exactly what they don't do," said the Collector rather unexpectedly: unexpectedly because Mr. Despard generally backed up his elder niece. "I agree that in this case it seems necessary," he went on, "because this precious muslin, or whatever it is, can only be bought there and the time is getting short. But you're to go in the car and take ayah with you."

"Right-ho!" said Flavia brightly. "Muslin, April."

April chuckled. "Crêpe de Chine, Uncle Arthur," she said reprovingly.

"In my day it was muslin," said Uncle Arthur. And then he met his sister's amused glance and laughed subterraneously, "No, it wasn't, though," he said, and went on eating hurriedly.

But April meditated on this subterranean laugh, and as the two sisters sat back in the car gazing out at the white dust-coloured hedges of Civil Lines she put her thought into words.

"Why did Uncle Arthur laugh at lunch about the muslin?" she enquired.

"Because he was thinking about the stodgy night-dresses they used to wear," said Flavia promptly. "Don't you remember that lady who lived next door to us in Devonshire? When she did her dhobie at home they used to be hung up on the line. Thick, thick

longcloth and an embroidery collar and long sleeves right down to the wrist. Mother said that they all used to be like that, she used to have them too."

"How frightful."

"Yes, but I'm not sure that yours aren't rather on the stodgy side," continued Flavia. "When I am married I shall have mine made of gauze, so that I show through them like a lovely filmy shadow," she ended complacently. She leaned forward. "Here we are," she said.

"Yes, but Uncle said that we were to go all the way in the car," said April, anxious to hide from Flavia her flaming face.

"I know he did, but we can't," said Flavia briefly. "It's so frightfully narrow and it's so much easier to walk if we are to go into shops. We'll take ayah," she said impatiently as April looked as if she was going to protest.

So' ayah scrambled down from the front seat and thrust her old feet into her native slippers with the turned-up toes. Ayah rather enjoyed these expeditions into the bazaar, especially if April was there. Hassan with the car was left underneath the old pipul-tree that dropped its long branches almost into the yawning mouth of the deep well underneath it. Flavia and April, with ayah padding along behind them, went off down the narrow bazaar street. Full of natives jostling one another. April exclaimed as they came face to face with one of them, "Why that's the ghastly creature who came to the bungalow this morning with a note," she said.

"Is it? I don't expect it is, they're all alike," said Flavia casually. Flavia, too, enjoyed going to the bazaar. All the funny little shops with their open fronts with the fat bunnias in them lolling on greasy mattresses. No one seeming to care whether you bought anything or not. Shops full of glass bangles: thousands of them. Men in the narrow street selling strings of beads. Tall sallow men from Bagdad with flowing coats and pointed red caps. Tongas jingling down the centre of the narrow street leaving you hardly any room, so that you had to squeeze close into the gutter to get out of their way. Ayah began to get cross.

"Ari baba!" She seized April by the arm and dragged her closer to her.

"All right, ayah, here we are at Multan's!" April, sensitive to other people's feelings, knew that ayah was anxious because of her. So she did not resent her impatient tug. April was very fond of ayah. The two girls went into the shop and were there for a long time. Multan's was a bigger shop than most of the others, and much more Anglicized. The native who served them was a Mohammedan and respectful. Also ridiculously in despair because he had not got any more of the *crêpe de Chine* that the English ladies wanted. Bale after bale he pulled down from the narrow shelves until the low counter looked like a delicious Neapolitan ice with its waves and billows of pale-coloured material. "I will obtain it for you, Miss-sahib," he said after a further desperate search.

"Thank you, but I am afraid we want it in a hurry," said April politely. "We will try somewhere else.

Don't you think that will be best?" she asked Flavia anxiously. Flavia was apt to get cross on shopping expeditions, and the fear of it always made April a little nervous.

"You can try, I'm too tired," said Flavia briefly.

"Perhaps we'd better go back, it's getting dark," said April uncertainly. "We must have been ages in Multan's." The two girls stood together in the open door of the shop. Ayah rose from her squatting position and shook out her sari. "Very dirty fellow talking to me," she said disdainfully. "But telling very fine shop for crêpe de Chine round next corner. Having all colours," said ayah.

"Well, do you think it's too late to go?" said April rather uncertainly. Twilight had stolen through the narrow bazaar streets as twilight always does steal in the East, silently and without any warning. Some of the shops already showed little flickering lamps in their crowded interiors. "And yet it can't be more than a quarter past four," April remarked.

"No, I don't think it's too late if you take ayah with you," conceded Flavia. "But I won't come as I'm rather tired. I'll go back to the car and wait for you there. Don't be long, though, April."

"All right," said April.

"There's fellow I told you about, Miss-sahib," said ayah suddenly. "Showing shop. Here, you fellow," ayah beckoned.

April stared. The same man again. Probably a sort of tout for the various boxwallahs in the neighbourhood, and the grubby note that he had had in his hand

when he had presented himself in the compound of the Collector's bungalow that morning must have been a bill.

"This way, Miss-sahib," the man spoke in the vernacular. April followed him, ayah padding behind. The narrow bazaar street took a quick turn to the right, showing a little street even narrower, and with tall dilapidated houses on either side of it. April stopped abruptly.

"No, ayah, I'm not going," she said decidedly. "It's getting too dark. I'll leave it."

"Very near, Miss-sahib," said the dirty man, turning. And so it was. A tiny little shop with the usual open front, although all blocked up with strips of brightly coloured cotton materials. "Here, Miss-sahib," he announced grandly.

April and ayah stepped up rather uncertainly into the dimly lighted interior. A fat, unwieldy old native got up from a low divan behind the narrow counter. The dirty native who had escorted them ran to the door and beckoned to another man who apparently had been close at their heels. Ayah was the first to see that something was wrong. She clawed at April's arm and began to drag her. But expense had been no object with the Maharanee. In Burmah there is an ingenious little weapon that spits a powerful narcotic if it is required to do so. Poor old ayah got it first and was the first to succumb to it.

"Ronald! Ronald!" April was screaming. And then she too crumpled up and fell across ayah's soft yielding body. And the rest was easy. Up the stairs to the first

floor of the tiny overhanging shop. There they were both dumped for the moment anyhow. Soon it would be darker and the Maharajah's Rolls Royce was just round the corner. The two men squatted down below and smoked and counted out, although a little grudgingly, the silver rupees to the old bunnia, who absolutely declined to take notes.

"For so great a risk one requires to see the true coin," he said, and bundled the large heaps of clinking rupees into an old washleather bag. But under the pipul-tree Flavia waited, and then began to get a little anxious. Hassan was standing behind the car: she put her head out of the window and spoke to him.

"Go and see where they are, Hassan," she said. "I left them at Multan's, and they were going further on to another shop. A man told them where to go. A man with his puggaree hanging down his back: frightfully dirty. It's a shop round a corner somewhere."

"Attcha, Miss-sahib," Hassan went off. And in about twenty minutes he came back with the dirty man in tow.

"Telling ayah and Miss-sahib taking tonga home from other end of bazaar," he said.

"Thank Heaven," said Flavia, who had been really frightened and was now consequently rather cross. She felt in her purse and gave the dirty man five annas, and he salaamed and went away. Hassan got into the car and with his finger on the self-starter waited for orders.

"Home, of course," said Flavia snappily.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LONG afterwards Miss Baker thought with a sort of childish simplicity of how kind it had been of God to make her change into her nice velvet coat and pleated skirt that night. Because she so often did not do it when she was just dining simply at home. But she forgot all about her clothes when she saw Mr. Despard's face. He just walked up the verandah steps from the car and stared at her.

"Is April here?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, no," said Miss Baker, who had caught that rather musical way of prefixing a negative from an American friend of hers.

"Good God! where is she?" said the Collector. And then he saw Miss Weaver and the other two rather meagre ladies staring at him in astonishment. The Collector had not even removed his hat, they were thinking vaguely. He whipped it off. "I'm sorry," he said. "But it's this . . ." And then he told them.

"She must still be in the bazaar," said Miss Baker promptly.

"She's not. I phoned to Keston and got him to have it searched. Of course I don't want to rouse the whole station yet, because anything may have happened, I mean, she and ayah may have . . . well, I don't know what they may have done," ended the Collector rather

hopelessly. "I mean to say that the whole thing only happened a couple of hours ago. Flavia got back to the bungalow at a quarter to five and it's now a quarter to seven," said the Collector, shooting a quick glance down at his watch.

Only two hours and yet already he had turned to her, thought Miss Baker, sending out a little trembling thanksgiving to God.

"I should say that it was almost impossible to search the bazaar. She must be there," said Miss Baker positively.

"I know I should say that it is quite likely. But we can't find her," said the Collector, and he looked at Miss Baker's kind wise mouth and for the first time thought that it would be delightful to have the right to kiss it.

"Can I help?" and then Miss Baker broke off. After all, why should she thrust herself in?

"Yes, you can. Come along back with me now if you will," said Mr. Metcalfe abruptly. He stood and chatted absently to the other three ladies, who still remained on the verandah. Miss Baker had bolted along to her room to get her coat. Hatless she came hurrying back.

"Are you warm enough?" asked the Collector. And Miss Weaver shivered. Although in a way she thought she would be glad if Margaret Baker left the Mission. Something now seemed to radiate from her which disturbed and made uneasy everyone else.

"Quite warm enough," said Miss Baker. And she thrilled because he minded if she was warm enough or not. She settled herself into the car beside him and felt

that she didn't care if it ran into a hedge and she was killed. At any rate, before dying she had known what it was to have a man who really minded if she was warm or not. Miss Baker was too modest to hope for much. But he turned to her in trouble. And that was more—infininitely more—than she deserved.

All the way back to Civil Lines the Collector talked. He and Miss Baker agreed that this must have to do with the people at the Kotpana Palace. "They were after Flavia," he said, "and they've got April; of course the girls are exactly alike. What in Heaven's name am I to do? I don't like to tell anyone that I suspect Prince Hernam Singh, it makes the whole thing so disgraceful for Flavia."

"Yes."

"I mean to say that the whole thing's so perfectly frightful," said the Collector, feeling a throb of relief that Miss Baker was no longer a young girl so that he could talk to her frankly. "You know the Indian as well as I do. If he's got Flavia. . . ."

"But he hasn't, he's got April," prompted Miss Baker, suddenly feeling very hopeful, partly because the Collector was talking like a wretched, bewildered little boy. She laid a square sensible hand on his arm.

"You perfect brick, so he has," said the Collector, taking his left hand off the driving-wheel and squeezing Miss Baker's hand with it. "But do you think with a native it would make the remotest difference which one he had got as long as it was an English girl and at his mercy?"

"Oh yes, I do," said Miss Baker, and she laughed a

little deprecatingly. "After all, I don't think as badly of Prince Hernam Singh as that. You know, we at the Mission hear a great deal that you civilians don't," she said. "The Maharanee is a perfect terror in that household. She knows everything that goes on outside although she is never seen. I should not be at all surprised if this has not all been engineered by her."

"But what for?" groaned the Collector.

"I don't know," said Miss Baker. "That's what we've got to find out." The car was coming nearer to the Cantonments. Better roads, better lighting, the unmistakable mark of British occupation. They passed the Club, brightly lighted up. They could hear the band. Nobody there knew yet, of course. Keston had advised keeping quiet about the whole thing until it was necessary to make it known. Keston had a daughter of seventeen at school in England and made an instant resolve that he would keep her there, at any rate until this Government went out. "The — impertinence of it," he said to his assistant, handing him a little automatic pistol as Murphy sat there waiting in his two-seater car. "I'd say shoot the brutes at sight if I didn't know that it would mean that you and I would both get our marching orders within the week! But if anyone shows fight, kill the swine and I'll take the responsibility," and he marched up the steps of his verandah again.

But no shooting was necessary. The bazaar lay placid under the stars. The European sergeant, saluting his superior officer, said that he could find out nothing at all. Everyone disclaimed any knowledge of having seen

the two Miss-sahibs and their ayah. Even Multan, closely questioned, seemed a little vague about it. Bribed or terrorized, thought the European sergeant, but he did not say so.

"The chauffeur swears that they went up the bazaar street," said Mr. Murphy, who adored Flavia and could not help feeling half-mad with relief that it was not she who had disappeared.

"And so I'm sure they did, sir," said the sergeant. "But you'll never get one of these scoundrels to admit it, if they can make a couple of annas out of saying the other thing."

"No, quite," said Mr. Murphy. And taking the European sergeant into his small car he went tearing back to the Collector's bungalow again. Personally he did not think that April was in the bazaar at all, at any rate not by then. He said so as he stood in the middle of a little group in the daintily furnished bungalow.

"Then where is she?" said the Collector, who had sent his sister and Flavia to bed—at least, if not to bed, to their rooms—so that he and Ronald and the police officer could talk undisturbed.

"God! I'm going to the bazaar myself," said Ronald. Half beside himself with anxiety, he had up to that moment retained an appearance of calm. But now it was nearly nine o'clock. April alone somewhere in the pitchy darkness of night. Timid and shrinking as she was. It was unendurable to stay here and do nothing.

"I'll come with you," said Miss Baker promptly.

She looked up into the Collector's clean-shaven anxious face.

"No." And then the Collector broke off. "Listen!" he said. They all stood and listened. A car was turning in at the gate. It crept up to the foot of the short flight of steps and stood there. A small car with April's pale face showing through the window of it. Someone bunched up and white and unwieldy in the dickey. A tall, dark man getting out of the door on the far side and coming round the silver-plated bonnet with a trembling mouth.

"Prince Hernam Singh!" Ronald was down the steps in two strides and wrenching open the door. Prince Hernam Singh disregarded him and walked up the steps to the Collector with his two olive-coloured and shaking hands held up as if in prayer.

"Sahib, before you condemn me, hear," he pleaded.

PART V

CHAPTER XXXVII

PRINCE HERNAM SINGH had left the Club rather later than usual that night, although he had intended to go home earlier because Flavia was not there. When he did not see her he tormented himself with all sorts of dreadful imaginings. She was ill. Or worse than that—because people got better when they were ill—she had engaged herself to Captain Meredith or Mr. Murphy. Prince Hernam Singh would fling himself down in a long chair in the Club smoking-room and close his eyes and picture Flavia in the arms of another man. Then he would get up, trying to do so in a leisurely manner because otherwise men would stare at him, and roam about the wide verandahs. Into the billiard-room and out of it again. Down into the ballroom, where perhaps by some divine chance she might be. No, she was not. Perhaps the Collector was in the men's bridge-room; if he was there placidly playing bridge nothing at any rate too momentous could have happened to his niece. No, he was not. Prince Hernam Singh drew his head back as quickly as he had thrust it in.

But not quickly enough. He was hailed from the table nearest to the door. Would he come and make up a fourth? They had been expecting Murphy, who had not turned up.

Murphy! Hideous name: where could he be? Murder-

ous thoughts darted through Prince Hernam Singh's brain. But deep down he was pleased at being asked to play bridge with Europeans. Cursing himself for his servility he sat down at the table with them.

So it was late before he got back to the Palace. Dinner was ready in the badly furnished room giving on to the old paved courtyard. He ate alone and sparingly, waited on by two servants dressed in the Kotpana livery, which was of a very bright green cloth with a great many buttons on it. He ate curry made of lentils with exquisitely boiled rice served with it, and crunched up little fragments of various condiments at the same time. He drank orangeade, the conventional labels on the thick glass bottles of it looking queer in the dingy Oriental surroundings. The dark cloth punkah swung monotonously over his head, pulled by a coolie who squatted on an upturned box in the courtyard. A musk-rat ran squeaking round the floor close to the wainscoting. The noiseless barefooted servants waited and gazed opaquely at one another and wondered what would be happening in half an hour's time when the Huzoor saw what was waiting for him upstairs. And then Prince Hernam Singh, having eaten three beautiful oranges, pulling off the loose skin of them with his long nervous fingers, stooped over his finger-bowl, splashed the water with its two floating rose-leaves on its surface over his face, and rinsing his fingers vigorously, got up, throwing his limp dinner napkin on the floor. "Huzoor." Both servants bent low to their feet in a profound salaam as Prince Hernam Singh walked out into the courtyard. Standing there he breathed in the cold night air and

stared up at the stars. The stars—how crazy Rima was about them, and his father. Ah, but there was the moon: a pale crescent hanging in an abyss of inky blue. His Moonflower! Prince Hernam Singh stood still and shut his eyes.

The steps up to his own apartments ran through the centre of the Palace, and he walked up the cold marble of them with his eyes on the ground. The lighting was the worst part of this old Palace. Miserable, ineffectual lamps lighted the staircase. In his own rooms he had Aladdin lamps bought in Bombay. Four servants had been summarily dismissed because they did not understand them. The fifth had mastered the working of them at once because he had once served a brief and unsuccessful apprenticeship in the Railway Workshops. This man was Prince Hernam Singh's most faithful attendant. He sat now on a little mat outside his master's apartments and rose as he saw him coming up the staircase.

"Salaam, Huzoor."

"Salaam, Punnoo." Prince Hernam Singh raised a weary hand to his forehead. Suddenly he felt sick of everything. His pursuit of his Moonflower, of what avail was it? He opened the heavy gilt door that led into his room and banged it too with a sensation of complete misery. Probably even now she lay in the arms of that devil Murphy. That devil Murphy with his white face. To see him stranded on that sandy oasis in the middle of the river that rushed under his windows what would he not give? Stuck there, waiting for the spate that would bring the crocodiles crawling up on to it. Snapped up by those relentless jaws, signet ring with crest on it and gold cuff-links all complete. Prince

Hernam Singh had shot many crocodiles and seen the loot that they contained in their cavernous interiors. And he then stumbled back against the closed door. Flavia! in his room and her Madrassi ayah with her. The ayah standing with her sari held out in front of her, shrieking at him.

"You touch my Miss-sahib I tearing your eyes out." Ayah had completely lost control of herself. "You beastly villains you. You letting my Miss-sahib go or my killing. Collector sahib killing all lot of you. My telling him." Ayah, terrified beyond all control, began violently to sob.

"She won't let me come out of the corner." April, feeling still a little stupid in her head, was weakly laughing.

"You keep there, baba." Poor old ayah, conscious of her complete helplessness, flattened April back against the wall again.

"But what . . ." And then Prince Hernam Singh grasped that this was not Flavia at all who stood behind ayah, but April.

"You opening door and letting baba and ayah go, or my killing," screamed ayah, making feints of fumbling about under her sari to find some hidden weapon.

"Stop it," said Prince Hernam Singh, who was trembling so that he felt he would crumple forward on to his knees.

"Be quiet, ayah," said April vaguely. Although now the narcotic had very nearly worn off, they had been in this room for nearly an hour and a half. How they got there she did not know. She remembered the little dark shop in the narrow street and no more.

"How on earth . . ."

"I don't know," said April, laughing weakly again.

"Tell your ayah to let you come out of the corner," said Prince Hernam Singh, who did not care for the idea of ayah's sharp teeth in his hand.

"She won't. She's been like this ever since we found ourselves here," said April.

"I'll speak to her." Prince Hernam Singh spoke rapidly in the vernacular. Ayah listened, at first defiantly, and then incredulously. And then her old wrinkled face lost its terror. She stood aside and April came out of her corner. She walked a little uncertainly towards Prince Hernam Singh, and her forehead puckered.

"I say, I am glad to see you," she said, and she held out her hand to him.

Prince Hernam Singh took it, and even in that alarming moment April was surprised to feel how soft and cold it was. Not a bit like an ordinary man's hand.

"Tell me," he said briefly.

April related what had happened, and ayah, crouching on her haunches, listened, every now and then interspersing a word of rapid Hindustani.

"I see." Prince Hernam Singh's face was thunderous. His mother—the hideous import of her well-laid plot was perfectly clear to him. And he stood quite silent in the middle of the large marble-floored room and wondered what indeed he would have done if the plot had not miscarried and it was Flavia who stood in front of him. Blazing thoughts flamed through his mind of what Flavia would have wanted him to do. And then he came back to earth and saw April.

"We must instantly return to the Collector's bungalow," he said. "Do not let your ayah leave the room

on any pretext whatever. I will summon the car." Prince Hernam Singh opened the tall gilt door, said a word to someone outside it, and then came back agian.

And a little later the old Maharanee, lying sleepless on her low charpoy, heard the sound of the car coming round from the large converted elephant-house, the converted elephant-house that was a constant cause of fury to the Maharanee. For in it she saw the hated influence of the British. For generations the Maharajahs of Kotpana had kept elephants. And now nothing but motor-cars for their movement from place to place.

"Then why should you cease to keep elephants?" she had flung furiously to her elder son.

"Because I think they are a damned nuisance and an unwarrantable expense," Prince Hernam Singh had replied in high-flown Hindustani.

"Ah, why did I ever send you to the Oxford?" stormed the Maharanee. And now as she lay and rolled on her low charpoy and heard the car go past the entrance to the Palace and out hooting melodiously on to the main road she cursed again. Not yet three-quarters of an hour since it had arrived from the same direction with her son in it. Had, then, her well-laid plot miscarried? Or was it again the cursed influence of the British showing itself in her son's disdain to take by strategy what was not his by right of lawful wedlock? If her plot had miscarried . . . the Maharanee rolled and twisted in a passion of rage. Those responsible for its abortion should die a dreadful death. The Maharanee sat up on her bed, hunched up her knees and flung her bare arms round them, gazing malignantly out into the unsavoury darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

PRINCE HERNAM SINGH was closeted with the Collector for about half an hour in the drawing-room with the door shut. Mr. Murphy, seeing the prospect of a word with Flavia, hung about until Mrs. Metcalfe came along the verandah wiping her eyes and saying that Flavia would be along in a minute. Ronald and April had disappeared in the dining-room. Miss Baker sat and stared at Mrs. Metcalfe and wondered whether she ought to go before the Collector came out of the drawing-room. And yet, how would she get home? wondered Miss Baker, staring at her indoor shoes and thinking of how tamely it had all ended and of how her unconscious hope that she really would be able to be of some use had faded away into mist.

"It was perfectly sweet of you to come round," said Mrs. Metcalfe after a little pause.

"No, it wasn't, I hoped that I could really be of some help," said Miss Baker gruffly, trembling because she thought that she had heard the drawing-room door open and then realizing that she hadn't.

"You have been of help," said Mrs. Metcalfe, looking at Miss Baker and thinking how much better-looking she was than she used to be. Mrs. Metcalfe knew quite well that Miss Baker was in love with her brother and only wished that Arthur would return that love. But he was

so difficult to understand. Sometimes she thought that he really did think rather seriously of Miss Baker and then she thought that he didn't.

"What exactly has happened?" asked Miss Baker after a little pause.

"This," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and told her. "Prince Hernam Singh seems to have behaved magnificently," she added warmly.

"Of course, it's the Maharanee," began Miss Baker, and then she stopped. After all, she reflected, it was nothing to do with her.

"Yes," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and then she too fell silent. Both were thinking of Flavia, who at that moment was talking rather earnestly to Mr. Murphy at the other end of the verandah. He in his white uniform with his hard white helmet tumbled anyhow down on the ground was sitting and gazing at her. A nice young man, thought Miss Baker, noting his honest mouth and well-kept hands.

"Has it upset April at all?" asked Miss Baker.

"Wonderfully little; ayah is the more overcome," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "Splendid, courageous old woman that she is! We must think of a glorious present to give her."

"Is April taking her with her on Thursday?"

"Yes, she won't leave her. And as Madras is really her home it all turns out splendidly," said Mrs. Metcalfe. "And after this neither she nor Ronald will be able to do enough for her."

"No, I should think they wouldn't," said Miss Baker. And then a heavy flush stole up from under

the collar of her blouse. The drawing-room door was opening.

"Ah, Prince Hernam Singh," Mrs. Metcalfe had jumped impulsively on to her feet. The young Indian salaamed deeply and held out his hand.

"I can't say any more than thank you," said Mrs. Metcalfe simply, and her eyes filled with tears. She turned. "Flavia, here is Prince Hernam Singh," she said briefly.

"Oh." Flavia looked rather self-consciously at Mr. Murphy and got up. Prince Hernam Singh glanced over her head, looking at Mr. Murphy. The Collector broke the awkward silence. "Well, it's getting late," he said. "And we're all more or less complete wrecks. Good, the car's here. Miss Baker, I'll take you home. If Prince Hernam Singh will back his a little. Get in."

"Could I not be of service in taking Miss Baker back to the Mission," said Prince Hernam Singh courteously. "To a certain extent our paths lie in the same direction."

"Well . . ." the Collector hesitated. At the moment he longed for nothing so much as a long drink and then his bed.

"Of course, it will be the very thing," said Miss Baker immediately. She did not look at Mrs. Metcalfe because, in a swift instant, she realized that she knew exactly what she was feeling.

"Well, but——"

"I should be wretched if I thought I was taking you miles out into the country at this time of night," said Miss Baker, and her steady mouth uttered the lie without a quiver.

"Well. . . ." And then the Collector heaved a long sigh of relief. The little group on the verandah stood still and felt strangely ill at ease. Prince Hernam Singh gazed at Flavia and then turned away and began to walk down the steps followed by Miss Baker. Mr. Murphy, standing there, felt awkwardly that he ought to have gone away before. Left to himself he would like to have thrown a deck-chair after the retreating form of the Indian. Instead of this dreadful and reprehensible happening having done him harm it had somehow done him good, thought Mr. Murphy passionately.

"Well, I think we'd all better go to bed," said the Collector when the tail-lamp of the retreating car had gone winking round the small lawn and out at the gate. "Have a drink before you go, Murphy?"

"No, thank you, sir," said Mr. Murphy. "I'll get along. Good night!"

"Good night," said the Collector cheerily. Mr. Murphy walked down the steps and got into his car that stood a little way away. Flavia walked down the verandah to her bedroom and Mrs. Metcalfe and her brother stood and stared at one another.

"What's going to happen next?" she asked, and her face was a little puckered.

"I don't know. I'll see Keston in the morning and see what he thinks," said the Collector. "Now for God's sake let's go to bed. Leave Ronald and the child, they'll have heaps to say to each other. Tell them they can have the drawing-room to themselves."

"All right," said Mrs. Metcalfe briefly. She gave the message as she passed along to her own room.

"Thank you, Madeline." Ronald came out of the dining-room. "She's all right," he said in a low passionate undertone.

"Yes, thank God for it," said Mrs. Metcalfe, feeling that she was speaking hysterically and yet somehow not being able to help it. It had all been so frightful, she thought. She went on into her bedroom, and pulling the curtain along the brass rod behind her she sat down in a wicker chair and began to think. Her younger child doped in the bazaar and taken for hours to the Palace of a Native Prince. What might it not have meant? Unspeakable things. Thanks to Prince Hernam Singh's chivalry it had not meant anything more than a very serious fright to a good many people. But it might have meant much more. Terribly much more. Mrs. Metcalfe got up and began to wander about the room doing little ordinary things to keep her mind occupied. She took off her shoes and put on bedroom slippers instead. She would have to say something to Flavia to make her realize what she was doing when she became involved with an Indian Prince, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, taking off her soft woolly jumper suit and getting into a dressing-gown. After all, April was safely back again with her lover. But supposing it had been Flavia who had been whisked off, would she have been safely back again? She would have to talk it all over with her brother, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, going into her little dressing-room to wash. At the moment she felt too dog-tired to think about anything but going to bed. But to-morrow. . . . And then she was conscious that there was someone in her bedroom.

Someone with soft padding feet. Mrs. Metcalfe was suddenly sick with fright. She was going to be murdered. A terrible swift revenge from Someone: Something. John! she almost screamed her lover's name. But it was only ayah coming across the floor. Weary, with her old eyes almost sunk in her wrinkled face. But anxious to speak with her memsahib, she said, waiting for Mrs. Metcalfe to emerge from the dressing-room.

"Well, ayah." Mrs. Metcalfe was ashamed of the way her heart was beating as she walked across the matted floor.

"Memsahib." Ayah's hands were wrenched together in front of her. "My wanting tell memsahib. My going Bangalore with Missy baba. But memsahib telling new ayah keeping Miss-sahib very safe. Very bad peoples in Kotpana. They stealing one Miss-sahib trying steal-'nother," said ayah, breaking out into a little anxious wail.

"Oh, ayah, we will be careful." Mrs. Metcalfe suddenly caught ayah's faithful old hands in hers. "Splendid, good ayah!" she said passionately.

"My very much loving you," said ayah in her queer broken English, and she laid her wrinkled face on Mrs. Metcalfe's soft hands.

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CHAPTER XXXIX

THE next morning everything seemed very much better. As usual, the weather was divine, and the compound shone and glistened under the heavy dew. The poinsettias flamed and flung shining petals to the ground, and the zinnias stood tall and dignified with their stiff multicoloured faces turned up to the sky. The head mali and his satellites padded about with their brimming kerosene oil tins of water, one in each hand and going with slightly bent knees because of the weight of them. The scent of the smoke from the kitchen hung faintly in the air; an aromatic scent, as the wood was the wood of the pipul-tree. Mrs. Metcalfe, remembering that it was her beloved child's wedding-day the next day, ate her toast and drank her tea at chota hazri, and felt better. She had already visited April in her room and noticed that she looked as fresh and happy as usual. All would be well, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, getting up from the table and calling ayah to see to her bath because she must get up early as there was so much to do—the presents to arrange and the furniture in the drawing-room to alter a little. Lots had been done already, but there was lots more to be done still. Ronald would help her, he was so splendid at things like that, never getting fussed and never by any chance cross. April was lucky, thought Mrs.

Metcalf, feeling disloyal as she remembered how April's father would suddenly get cross about nothing at all.

But a little way away from the bungalow things were not quite so harmonious. Mr. Despard had got up very early as he had arranged to see Mr. Keston, the Police Superintendent, in his office at eight o'clock.

"Sit down, Keston." Mr. Despard looked very nice in a grey flannel suit and Zingari tie. The Police Superintendent was in uniform.

"Murphy's told me all about it," said Mr. Keston without any preamble. "At least as much as he knew. Apparently everything's perfectly all right."

"So far as my niece is concerned, yes," said the Collector. "Prince Hernam Singh was very frank. He lays the whole thing at the Maharanee's door. She has found out that he is in love with Flavia and passionately resents it."

"So he's made a clean breast of it, then?"

"Yes, and very well he did it too," said the Collector, remembering Prince Hernam Singh's trembling mouth and suppliant attitude of the night before.

"I suppose the old harridan was after Flavia?" said Mr. Keston, not considering Prince Hernam Singh's sentiments towards the Collector's niece any concern of his.

"Yes."

"Well, what exactly are we going to do about it?" said Mr. Keston after a long pause. After all, as he reflected again, it was no concern of his that the Collector's niece was carrying on with an Indian.

Everyone in the Station knew it and talked about it and expressed various opinions about it. Everybody was rather disgusted, although nobody cared very much about Flavia; April was the favourite. The point at issue now was that such a flagrant flaunting of British authority and prestige should not be allowed to go unpunished: Mr. Keston was quite certain about that.

"Yes, but think what the publicity will mean," said the Collector after a troubled silence. He got up and began to walk about the room. "You know what people are. An English girl alone with a native in his room in the Kotpana Palace. They will draw their own conclusions. I simply can't stand the scandal," said the Collector.

"Yes—but . . ."

"To begin with, Simla will have to be consulted before we do anything," said the Collector. "They'll take weeks to get a move on because they'll have to write Home about it. The beauties at Home will take some time to realize that it's not exactly a privilege to spend a couple of hours in a native's bedroom. And——"

"Don't forget that the ayah was there," said Mr. Keston.

"I don't forget it," said Mr. Metcalfe. "Ayah turned up trumps. Although you and I know very well that ayah wouldn't have stayed long in that room unless Prince Hernam Singh had wished her to. He behaved extremely well," said the Collector warmly.

"Don't forget that he was confronted with the wrong girl," said Mr. Keston, who had thought once or twice

lately that it was time Despard retired and was now thinking it again.

"I know, I know," said Mr. Despard, and he began to walk about the room again.

"I consider that the Kotpana tribe should be given a very severe lesson," said Mr. Keston.

"Meaning exactly . . . ?"

"Well, take away five of the Maharajah's salute of guns," said Mr. Keston. "They always loathe that."

"Yes." The Collector pondered. "Couldn't we wait until the wedding is over?" he queried. "After all, April is going to be married to-morrow. If I send for Prince Hernam Singh to-day and tell him that we propose to communicate with Simla it will make a most fearful hoo-ha. He will probaby get into touch with Flavia somehow, and she will be upset because, although I don't believe for one moment that there's anything really serious between them, at any rate on her side, they are undoubtedly friendly. This will upset my sister just when she wants to be at her best. So you see, I don't feel that I really can start off about it all to-day," said the Collector anxiously.

"I don't believe in allowing the Indian any rope, Despard," urged Mr. Keston. "As it is we've practically ceased to rule India because of our spinelessness. They snap their fingers at us, and I'm sure I don't wonder," said Mr. Keston contemptuously.

"Yes, but only a couple of days, delay," urged the Collector. "One day, in fact. April is going to be married to-morrow. I'll send for Prince Hernam Singh the day after. Will that satisfy you?"

"My dear fellow, it's your daughter, no, niece, that's concerned and not mine," said the Police Superintendent dryly. "If I had my way I'd have every shop in the bazaar turned into the street and the contents of them guarded while the owners of them crawled under an arch of fixed bayonets held by British Tommies."

The Collector smiled.

"And be broken," he said slowly.

"I know. But we should at least feel that we were treating them in a way that they would appreciate and understand," said the Police Superintendent hotly.

"Yes, I know. But don't lose your hair about it so early in the morning," said the Collector good-temperedly. "And don't forget that the average person at Home gets most of his information about India from nice little stories in Parish Magazines. Come along in and have breakfast and forget about Simla and the Home Government. We'll forget about the whole affair until April is safely married. And then I'll promise you that I'll take the thing up really seriously."

"And will you send that other niece of yours away?" said Mr. Keston. "After all, the partial success of this abduction business shows that someone in the Kotpana Palace knows what he or she's about. You've no conception how cunning a woman can be. Or of how far her machinations can penetrate, especially a woman as wealthy and determined as the Maharanee of Kotpana."

"I shall send Flavia away," said the Collector instantly. "That's a very good idea of yours, Keston. Then you and I can really get down to it without any fear of complications. They've been invited to

Agra by people they met on the ship: my sister told me a day or two ago. It will be the very thing: I'll suggest it when all the tamasha of to-morrow is over. How does that do for you?"

"Excellently," said Mr. Keston, making the best of a bad business. Undoubtedly Despard ought to retire he thought, walking with his host across the little strip of sunflooded compound that divided the office from the main bungalow.

CHAPTER XL

AFTER dropping Miss Baker at the Mission bungalow the night before this conversation, Prince Hernam Singh set off at almost fifty miles an hour to the Palace. Going at that pace was dangerous so late at night, for the roads were unlighted and like cart-tracks with their dusty uneven surfaces. But Prince Hernam Singh did not care. His brown face under the soft felt hat was livid with fury. Now he could let himself go. Before the Collector he had maintained a comparative calm. But now he was going to have it out with his mother. Respect, deference, those were things of the past. She had had designs on the safety of and perhaps even the virtue of his Moonflower, the girl he loved. She should suffer for it: Prince Hernam Singh ground his dazzling teeth, accelerating recklessly.

The Palace was in darkness when he arrived at the arched gateway of it. High up in his own room he saw a little white light. But in his mother's apartments all was darkness. He left the car standing at the steps and walked in under the stone porch.

"Huzoor." Old Muttra, the chowkidar, was awake, squatting on his charpoy with his venerable head rolled up in a shawl and a lathi in his hands.

"Salaam, Muttra," Prince Hernam Singh went up the marble stairs two at a time. Asleep on a mat outside

the door of his own apartment lay Punnoo, completely covered with a blanket.

"Get up." Speaking in the vernacular Prince Hernam Singh gave his servant an impatient shove with his foot. Punnoo instantly sat up: grunted and then struggled on to his feet and salaamed deeply.

"Seek out Buria, the ayah of the Maharanee, and tell her that I wish to have speech with Her Highness," said Prince Hernam Singh swiftly.

"Huzoor."

"Quickly," said Prince Hernam Singh and Punnoo, hunting round for his native shoes, shuffled his brown feet into them and fled. Prince Hernam Singh followed more slowly. It was not seemly for him to penetrate into the women's quarters alone. Buria must prepare the way for him. Looking strangely out of place in his well-cut English clothes Prince Hernam Singh went slowly down the shallow marble stairs. And as he went his thoughts were busy. He was remembering the flower-filled drawing-room of the Collector with its pretty cretonne-covered chairs and vases of flowers. The well-bred dignity of the Collector himself. And earlier the flower-like daintiness of April as she had sat beside him in the car: shaken as she was, she had had the courtesy to make quiet conversation with him. And this, this meretricious grandeur in which he lived and its underlying squalor. Prince Hernam Singh took a long breath as he crossed through the smaller courtyard that separated the women's quarters from the main building. This was the last fresh air that he would breathe for a very long time, he thought disgustedly.

It was true. Summoned at last to the Maharanee's apartment, he gasped as he entered the stifling atmosphere of it. She sat hunched up on the bed, her still beautiful eyes busy under the folds of her shawl.

"Well?" She surveyed her elder son and her pan-stained mouth was uneasy.

"How dare you do it?" Prince Hernam Singh had completely lost control of himself. He stood and hurled curses at his mother. Careless that it was midnight and that she was only half awake and that she was his mother, he stood and raved at her. She had disgraced him in the eyes of the British—the British, who were the only people in this God-forsaken and damnable country who knew how to behave.

But the Maharanee was equal to it all. She heaved herself up on her charpoy and cursed him back. She cursed the white girl who had bewitched him. If she had had her way she should have been thrown to the crocodiles, she screamed. Was this her son, this white-livered creature who had not had the spirit to work his will on the girl delivered into his hands? So this was what Oxford had done for him. Good money thrown away. Worse than thrown away. The Maharanee spat out Hindustani in a flood.

"You damned fool, you brought the wrong girl to the Palace," raved the Prince, equally fluent. He gasped as the stuffy atmosphere of the room filled his lungs. "And even if you had not done so, would it have made any difference?" he raged. "No, it would not. I love the girl and intend to make her my wife. Should I require a mistress there are plenty at hand. Black, greasy

smelling native women. How I detest them," swore Prince Hernam Singh, snatching in his pocket for his silk pocket-handkerchief and wiping his forehead with it.

"The wrong girl?" The Maharanee spoke ominously quietly.

"Yes, the wrong girl. The girl who to-day is to be married to an English officer," said Prince Hernam Singh, as the rather cracked notes of a bell chimed out into the still midnight air. "Are not Rima and I bidden to the wedding? To be the mock and scorn of all the English who will be there. This you have done with your filthy interference."

"The English will not know," said the Maharanee swiftly. "It will be to the advantage of the Collector sahib to keep it all secret. The virtue of their women-folk is very sacred to them," sneered the Maharanee.

"Whether or not they know, the disgrace is mine," shouted the Prince. "But it has made me very resolute. I marry the girl as soon as she will take me, and leave this accursed country for ever."

"For ever?"

"For ever," stormed the Prince. "I shake the dust of this accursed house for ever from my feet. Rima may take the heritage that will one day be mine."

"My son." The Maharanee had begun to howl.

"Unavailing to plead with me," said Prince Hernam Singh, who had now become calmer. "My mind is made up. I love the girl and I think that she returns my love. Yes, unworthy of her though I may be I think she returns my love: I shall wed her according to her

English custom and depart with her to the England as soon as may be feasible."

"You shall not," hissed the Maharanee, and she rolled off her charpoy and advanced towards her son. "Curse you!" she screamed, and she shook her fist in his face.

Prince Hernam Singh laughed scornfully and turned away. He went back to his own room and told his servant to get him a hot bath. And as he lay in it he reflected that the sooner he could persuade Flavia to marry him the better. His mother was a dangerous woman at the best of times, and now that she was so incensed she was more dangerous than ever. He got out of the bath and dried himself on a big English bath sheet and thought that it was time that he wrote to Bombay for some more bath salts. His pyjamas were of thick silk and he held his head proudly as he walked back into his bedroom. Once away from the Palace, and especially if he was careful about his clothes, he would not look so much like an Indian, thought Prince Hernam Singh, peering in the glass and loathing his dark brown eyes and long black eyelashes.

"At what hour shall I bring the Huzoor the chota hazri?" enquired Punnoo, standing patiently by the door so that he should not breathe the deadly night air that came gushing in through the open window.

"Early," said Prince Hernam Singh. "I attend the shardy^{*} of the Collector sahib's niece. Put ready the white Jodpurs and the pale blue puggaree and the diamond clasp."

* Wedding.

"Huzoor," said Punnoo, wondering what had happened to the niece who shortly before had been in this very apartment. She had left abruptly, but probably the Huzoor had taken her somewhere for safer custody.

"Probably soon I also wed a niece of the Collector sahib," said Prince Hernam Singh, feeling that in some way it made the whole thing more real to impart the information to his servant.

"Huzoor."

"And I shall probably require you to accompany me to the England," said Prince Hernam Singh, kicking off his expensive bedroom slippers and starting to get into his equally expensive English bed.

"Huzoor," said Punnoo, his opaque eyes gleaming.

"Now leave me alone and extinguish the lamp," said Prince Hernam Singh, settling himself between his pale green linen sheets that he had bought in Bond Street.

"Huzoor," and Punnoo salaamed and went away. Lying down on his mat outside the door he covered his head with his blanket and went instantly to sleep. And so did Prince Hernam Singh go instantly to sleep because he was terribly tired. But the Maharanee had never been more terribly and more widely awake. She summoned Buria, and the two talked until the pale dawn came flooding amber coloured from behind the hills. And then Buria left her and went padding down the shallow marble stairs and out through the courtyard gate on to the chill and dusty road.

CHAPTER XLI

PART of the joy of India is that at certain times of year you know it cannot rain. No dreadful having to wonder whether you need take an umbrella or not, or whether any function that you are either going to attend or give yourself will be ruined by a sudden downpour of rain. So Mrs. Metcalfe waked on April's wedding-day with a perfectly serene mind. The anguish of parting with her beloved child had all been done away with by the thought of her own happiness. There undoubtedly was a certain amount of anxiety in connection with Flavia still to be met and dispersed, but that had been mitigated by her brother telling her the night before that he thought it very much better that she and Flavia should go away immediately after the wedding. That a certain amount of action would have to be taken about April's abduction, although no harm had come of it, and that she and Flavia were better out of the way. That Keston was emphatic that the Maharanee of Kotpana was mixed up in it all, and that she was a dangerous and unscrupulous woman and would have to be shown that she could not behave in the reckless and insulting manner that she obviously thought she could.

"Do you think that she has found out that Prince Hernam Singh is keen on Flavia?" Mrs. Metcalfe looked very anxious indeed as she asked the question.

"Yes, I do," said the Collector briefly. "And that's

why I think it particularly advisable that you and Flavia should get out of the place for a few days. You have had this invitation to Agra and you ought to see the Taj. You go off and I'll settle the whole thing before you come back, if I can. If I can't you will have to stay a little longer. There are several quite good hotels there if the Wilsons can't keep you indefinitely."

So that was settled and mercifully Flavia was quite agreeable. Although she did not say so in so many words, she knew that she would feel flat and dull after her sister had gone. It would be jolly to see something new, thought Flavia, staring at her bridesmaid's dress and thinking that it was awfully stupid that April had got married first.

So Mrs. Metcalfe waked on April's wedding-day feeling almost perfectly happy. Soon she too would be going to the arms of the man she adored, she thought, watching April's bright eyes, and quickly changing colour as she sat up in her narrow bed and stared at her mother through the mosquito curtain that enshrouded it.

"Madeline." And then everything began to be joy and excitement. Ayah, quite recovered, came padding in with the chota hazri. Flavia, unusually amiable, came through the curtain that separated her room from April's and said that on this last morning they must all have their chota hazri together. The three women, looking all more or less the same age, dragged up chairs and sat round the wicker table in their gay kimonos and ate and drank excitedly. There was still a good deal to be done in the way of arranging presents and altering furniture. They were to have "brunch" at eleven o'clock and the wedding was to be at two.

Heaps of time to dress and see that the presents were all right and not to get fussed about it. April sat and ate her toast and wondered if any human being had ever been so happy as she was. Tucked away inside her nightdress was a little note that Ronald had sent her the night before from the General's bungalow, where he was staying. She would not see him now until she saw him waiting for her in church.

"A ridiculous convention, my sweet, but still we can afford to let them have their own way for the last time, can't we?"

"Don't walk too fast up the aisle." Flavia with a great deal of marmalade and butter on her toast began to give directions.

"All right."

"And don't forget to take off your gloves in plenty of time. Hand them to me, I shall be quite ready."

"All right," said April again and beamed at her mother. "You and Flavia had better be married at the same time, Madeline," she said. "Flavia has got heaps of people to choose from, haven't you, Flavia?"

"Yes," said Flavia complacently. "I shall decide during the next month, and then John can come out and we'll be married together, Mummy."

"Hooray," said Mrs. Metcalfe childishly. And then she went back to her room and began to dress. God had been very good, she thought, splashing about in the beautiful hot bath that the new ayah had got ready for her. The new ayah had arrived the night before and had been produced by Mitu, who was not going to risk any queer person taking her place. She seemed a nice woman, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, watching

her pouring the cold water out of the big earthenware ghurrah. Younger than ayah a good deal and not perhaps so experienced. But still she would soon learn, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, encouraging her eager efforts with a pleasant smile.

So everything on this auspicious day went well. Very soon it was time for April to dress. Flavia and her mother helped her and then Flavia went away to dress herself, and Mrs. Metcalfe stood and looked at her younger daughter.

"My precious," she said, and then she began to cry.

"Mummy!" and April just took a step forward. "You darling, it will always be just the same," she said, and she held her mother closely.

"No, darling, it won't, and I know that it won't and mercifully can be glad about it," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she wiped her eyes quickly. It was stupid of her to cry and she knew it. "Only to me—you have been——" and then Mrs. Metcalfe gave up trying to express herself and went away to dress. And April, left alone, stood and stared at herself in the rather spotted long glass and felt a queer pang of reproach that nothing, not even her beloved Madeline's tears, could make her feel anything but joy on this heavenly day. To be always with Ronald: no stupid having to say good night, or to mind if people saw, thought April, collecting her gloves and thinking that she wouldn't put them on until the very last minute.

The Garrison Church was crammed. Everyone liked April and everyone was glad that she was marrying so happily. Ronald Carew was a very good sort, and it was said that he was extremely good at his job too.

Rumour had it that the General was going to try to get him on his Staff, and as rumour also had it that the General was soon going to get promotion that would be jolly for Major Carew. The people in the crowded pews looked at the gallant figure in uniform standing waiting at the chancel steps and thought that April was lucky. Prince Hernam Singh, standing with his brother in a seat rather near the front, gazed at Ronald and hated him because his face was white. His own face, olive-coloured and distinguished looking below the flaunting puggaree, was also attractive enough in its own way. But he did not think so. Everyone in the crowded church was white except him and his brother, thought Prince Hernam Singh, feeling hatred and passion because Mr. Murphy the policeman was showing people into their seats. He would see Flavia before he did, thought the Prince, longing to turn round to see if she had arrived and not daring to.

However, he was soon rewarded. Flavia, looking extremely beautiful in her pale blue bridesmaid's dress, turned and smiled at him as she went up the aisle behind April's long train. Prince Hernam Singh only just glanced at her, but his eyelashes trembled with emotion. People seeing Flavia smiling at him thought that she had no business to do it. But as nobody but Mr. Murphy and Mr. Keston and Miss Baker knew about the incident of forty-eight hours before nobody thought very much about it. Besides, the girl was going away with her mother to Agra and a very good thing too. No good ever came of friendship between the races, that was well known enough by people who knew the country.

CHAPTER XLII

EVERYONE feels flat after a wedding except the two people principally concerned. Everyone feels that things ought to go on being exciting and yet they know that they can't. No one is really satisfied except the bride and bridegroom themselves, who are so conscious of a profound relief that everyone is out of the way at last that they can hardly think of anything else. Ronald Carew felt this as, in the comfortable roomy first-class compartment of the Punjab Mail, that was roaring its way southward, he sat and looked at April, who sat and returned his glance for a moment or two and then looked out of the window because she suddenly felt so overwhelmingly shy.

"Happy?" Ronald's voice sounded a little more passionate than he meant it to.

"Yes, in a way."

"Only in a way?" Ronald's eyes twinkled. He got up from the end of the long seat and moved a little closer to April.

"It's all so odd," said April, speaking with a little difficulty.

"Not really. It's really the most natural and the most enchanting thing in the world," said Ronald easily, and he took April's small hand in his.

"Supposing. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Supposing you don't think me as nice as you thought you would," said April mournfully.

"But I shall," said Ronald calmly. Not being quite a young man Ronald was able to sense what was going on in April's mind. And he loved her sweet wild shyness as quite a young man might not have done. He lifted her soft hand to his mouth and kissed the bare palm of it. He told her that in a couple of hours they would be in Delhi, and that Maidens Hotel was extremely comfortable. That he had engaged two very nice big rooms with large verandahs and bathrooms attached, and that with ayah to look after her she would feel just as happy as if she was at home.

"Two rooms?" If Ronald had not been very much a man of the world he might have been alarmed by the relief that leapt into April's blue eyes.

"Yes."

"I thought . . ."

"Sweetheart." Ronald laughed out loud. With a huge effort of will he refrained from snatching his newly made wife into his arms and keeping her there by main force. "Beloved, I won't even look into your room unless you want me to," he said quietly.

"But . . ."

"Yes, I know. But you see I'm not a savage," said Ronald tenderly. "When you want me I am there. But not until you do."

"I feel as if I shall," said April after a long pause. "You're so . . . you're so . . ." April failed for a word.

"I'm not a bit. I'm simply intelligent," said Ronald simply. "I love you, you see, and so I understand."

"Oh . . ." and then April's breath came a little quickly and she held out her arms. "Come closer to me," she gasped, "because I love you so dreadfully."

"Do you? Really?" Ronald slid along the long seat. "Look, there's the Maharajah's Palace," he said, and he said it with his lips very close to April's small ear. "Doesn't it show up well with that huge rock behind it?"

"Yes." But April was not thinking about the Maharajah's Palace at all. She had forgotten Flavia and Prince Hernam Singh and even her mother. She was only thinking about the man who was her husband and her lover as well. She yielded her young soft mouth to his kisses.

But back in the Collector's bungalow Flavia was thinking about April and rather envying her. Ronald Carew had looked uncommonly attractive in his Royal Engineers uniform. They had had heaps of presents and a magnificent send-off at the station. She herself was not even engaged. Flavia felt thoroughly put out as she moved about her large bedroom. She had come early to bed as she still had a good deal of packing to do, and she and her mother were starting off for Agra at ten o'clock the next morning. But as when Flavia was cross she liked to have someone to vent it on she vented it on ayah—ayah, who hung nervously about, anxious to do the right thing and yet not knowing quite how to do it.

"Oh, don't be so idiotic." Flavia snatched at the

soft silk garment in ayah's brown hand. "Fold it, you stupid thing; don't stand and only stare at me."

"Attcha, Miss-sahib." Ayah spoke meekly, although her eyes were angry.

"Go away and have something to eat and then come back," commanded Flavia. "But don't, whatever you do, disturb me when you come in, because I expect I shall have gone to sleep. Put your rezai in the dressing-room and then you'll be well out of the way. Mind you come, though."

"Attcha, Miss-sahib," and ayah with relief shuffled into her native heelless slippers and padded away across the compound to the kitchen. But there, to the old Mohammedan cook she unburdened herself. What naukri was this, she demanded, where the Miss-sahib was a shrew? The memsahib was kind and so was the Miss-sahib who had recently departed. But this one . . . Ayah cleared her throat expressively.

"Not being sought in marriage she is perhaps embittered," suggested old Wali Mohamed, inhaling long breaths from his gaily decorated hookah.

"Who seeks in marriage a shrew?"

"No one," said Wali Mohamed, thinking with relief that his own wife had recently died from cholera.

"I sleep not in the Miss-sahib's dressing-room," declared ayah, gazing at her bundle of bedding that was lying in the corner of the little brick kitchen.

"No?" said Wali Mohamed placidly, as he reflected it was no concern of his.

"I appear to do so, but in reality I go to the bazaar," said ayah briefly.

"So be it," replied Wali Mohamed, who was tired and wanted to go to bed himself. With the assistance of a cook from the General sahib's bungalow Wali Mohamed had turned out a wedding breakfast that would have done credit to Gunter's. Over a queer charcoal stove with aluminium saucepans without handles the two men had stooped and worked with the dexterity of chefs. Both had been well rewarded and both were conscious of a busy day well over. A clacking tongue in his kitchen was out of place. Wali Mohamed drew the mouthpiece of his hookah from his mouth and yawned. He settled his puggaree a little more over one eye and hoped that ayah would take the hint and go. She did so after a moment or two's hesitation and with a twist of her ample skirts.

"Salaam, bhai," she said, and she gathered up her roll of bedding under one arm.

"Salaam, ayahma," said Wali Mohamed, and he waited until she was well out of the way to get up. And then he shut the door and stuffed a couple of dishcloths into a crevice where the wood had shrunk a little and the air might get in. And then completely covered over with a huge red rezai, Wali Mohamed settled himself in for the night. Only an occasional squawk from a fowl comfortably imprisoned under an upturned coolie basket disturbed his slumbers. The fowl was for to-morrow's dinner ; he would make a very good *vol au vent* with it, thought Wali Mohamed, hearing its plaint and wondering if twelve annas could be charged for it without the fear of awkward questions being asked.

Meanwhile ayah padded into the dressing-room adjoining Flavia's bedroom, listened for a moment or two and then very cautiously approached her eye to the crack of the door. Yes, the Miss-sahib was already asleep with the mosquito curtain tucked in securely round her. Ayah put her bedding cautiously down on the matted floor and then tiptoed out again. Through the little bricked bathroom this time, and she would leave the wire door ajar so that she could steal in again after her visit to the bazaar—the bazaar where she had seen that amiable man who had given her the string of beads that very morning.

And Mrs. Metcalfe, lying rather wakeful on her bed, stared through the close mosquito netting at the dimly seen white ceiling so high above her head and thought about April. Wondered about her as a mother always does wonder about her daughter when she steps out into a new untried life. And then her thoughts turned to herself and the new life that lay before her. But Flavia would have to marry first, thought Mrs. Metcalfe, turning and twisting, because the thought of Flavia always brought a tiny feeling of disquiet into her mind.

CHAPTER XLIII

AN Indian day begins early. It began at half-past six the next morning when the Police Superintendent heard the telephone bell shrilling from the little office that adjoined his bedroom, and tumbled leisurely out of the narrow camp-bed that stood on his verandah and went to answer it.

"*What?* Do you mean to say that she's not to be found anywhere?" The Police Superintendent's eyes abruptly widened as the voice in answer came quivering over the wires.

"Well, but she may have gone for an early walk," said the Police Superintendent, frowning out into space. "No? Well then I'll come along at once." The Police Superintendent was accustomed to dressing and shaving in a hurry. A shouted order from the back verandah brought his bearer and chota hazri hurrying. As he drank the well-made tea and crunched the toast he walked between his bedroom and the telephone. Murphy . . . Mr. Keston had a very clear brain. His assistant was to meet him at the Collector's bungalow. The Collector, who had brought this disaster on himself by his failure to be strong when he ought to have been strong, thought the Police Superintendent, who was young and enthusiastic and had not yet had his enthusiasm quenched by those whose business it was to back him up when backing up was required and who

did not do it. He finished his chota hazri and his toilet, shoved an automatic pistol into his hip pocket and got into his car and made for the Collector's bungalow as fast as he could go.

And there he found a terror that he had not often found anywhere. Flavia was utterly gone from a disordered bedroom. The ayah had discovered it at about six o'clock that morning.

"What was the ayah doing when she found it out?" Mr. Keston had his notebook in his hand. Mr. Murphy and he were in the Collector's dressing-room, the door of it securely closed. Mrs. Metcalfe and the Collector sat and looked at them.

"She says that she was just preparing to go to her quarter," said Mrs Metcalfe tremblingly.

"Did she sleep in Flavia's room?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain of that?"

"I never doubted it," said Mrs. Metcalfe.

"Have her in and let's ask her," said Mr. Keston, and he glanced at his assistant.

"Very well, sir," Mr. Murphy went out, and as he went Mrs. Metcalfe got up and clutched at Mr. Keston's sleeve. "Do something quickly," she gasped.

"I will, only I must have something to go on first," said Mr. Keston kindly. "Ayah will tell us all she knows. Here she is. Ayah?"

"Sahib," said ayah, and her blue lips were shaking.

"Did you sleep in the Miss-sahib's dressing-room?"

"Nahin, sahib," said ayah, and she began to howl.

"I thought not," said Mr. Keston. "Now then, tell the truth. What time did you get back to the bungalow?"

"Twelve o'clock, sahib," said ayah.

"How did you get into the Miss-sahib's bedroom?"

"Leaving bathroom door open, sahib," wailed ayah.

"Was she in bed when you came in at twelve?"

"Not noticing, sahib," sobbed ayah. "Going straight to dressing-room and bedroom very dark. Not seeing, sahib."

"And when did you see that the Miss-sahib was not there?"

"About six o'clock, sahib. Packing up bedding and going to quarter. Seeing mosquito curtain all dragged, sahib. Looking for Miss-sahib and finding not there."

"I see. Now we'll go to Flavia's bedroom, please." Mr. Keston took no further notice of anyone but his assistant. "Come along, Murphy," he said, and the two men in their white uniform walked along the sun-flooded verandah.

"She's been carried off: not a doubt about it," said Mr. Keston quietly, as he stood in the disordered room. "Look, the mosquito curtain is torn. Any footmarks in the bathroom?"

"Yes," said Mr. Murphy after a long silence. His superior officer walked in and joined him.

"Yes, so there are. Get a dish-cover or something to cover them up and lock the bathroom. "I'll go off to the bazaar," said Mr. Keston shortly. "You stay here and try to get something out of the servants. Do all you can to reassure Mrs. Metcalfe. This is a bad business," he said briefly.

"Yes," Mr. Murphy's lips were white. Flavia, the girl he loved.

"Kotpana is at the bottom of it, of course," said Mr. Keston as he stood and scribbled in his notebook. "It

was obvious that it was fatal to ignore their first attempt even for twenty-four hours. They wanted a very severe punishment, and an instant one. However” the Police Superintendent snapped the elastic round his notebook again.

“You think . . . ?”

“I think that the Maharanee has engineered this,” said Mr. Keston. “She’s got wind that Prince Hernam Singh is keen on Flavia, and is determined to get her out of the way. It’s awful,” said Mr. Keston suddenly and his teeth closed on his lower lip.

“I shall . . .” Mr. Murphy suddenly got whiter.

“The only thing we can do now is to find her,” said Mr. Keston. “And I’m off to do it if I can. You carry on here. So long, Murphy.”

Mr. Murphy saluted. Mr. Keston went straight out of the bungalow and got into his car. The police sowar at the wheel saluted and then steered quickly down the wide drive. Mrs. Metcalfe from the verandah watched him go and then clung to her brother.

“What does he think?” she gasped.

“I don’t know. He won’t say till he’s sure,” said the Collector. He stood and stared about him like a man in a dream. Surely it couldn’t be true that Flavia had gone. And only yesterday all that joy about the wedding! What was he going to do? What could he do? Perhaps Flavia had only done it for a joke. And yet—the Collector remembered their terror of a couple of days earlier. And Prince Hernam Singh’s trembling admission that his mother. . . . This second attempt, of course, had been ventured because the first had been allowed to go unpunished.

"I must telegraph to the Wilsons," said Mrs. Metcalfe stupidly. Of course, she and Flavia had been going to start for Agra in an hour or two. "Or shall I wait for half an hour or so?" she said. "After all, Flavia may turn up."

"I should telegraph if I were you," said Mr. Despard briefly. "In any event, after all this you won't want to start to-day."

"Arthur, I have an awful feeling that some fearful harm has come to Flavia," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and her eyes suddenly flew wide open. "Arthur I—I. . ."

"Don't, dear, it's no earthly use," said Mr. Despard. He took hold of his sister's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "After all, this same thing happened to April," he said, "and we got her back in an hour or so."

"Yes, but April wasn't the one they wanted," said Mrs. Metcalfe, and she said it with pale lips.

"Keston's got the matter in hand," said the Collector, and he stared round him. Keston who had thought him lacking in purpose when that first thing happened. And now. . . . "I think I'll drive out and consult Miss Baker," he said abruptly. "Those people know the minds of these creatures. It won't take me long in the car."

"Yes, that's a very good idea," said Mrs. Metcalfe instantly. She suddenly visualized Margaret Baker's kind, steady smile and the straight stare of her short-sighted eyes. "Yes, go," she said, "and bring her back here if you possibly can. She'll be a help to all of us."

"Right-ho," said the Collector. And as the big saloon car flew over the indifferent roads to the Mission

bungalow he felt suddenly happier. He remembered the last time he had gone on the same journey. She had been so awfully intelligent and helpful. Past the Cantonments and along through the high cactus hedges and past the bright green ricefields. And then at last the low thatched roof of the Mission bungalow and the whitewashed walls of its numerous outbuildings.

And fortunately Miss Baker was in. Her early Scripture class over she was sitting in her bedroom darning her one pair of silk stockings. Only a tiny hole in the toe, mercifully, thought Miss Baker, to whom silk stockings were an extravagance. As she darned she thought with a quick stab at her heart of the Collector. How that a few days before he had really seemed to like her. And how that at the wedding yesterday he had barely noticed her. And there had been plenty of opportunities too, after the bride and bridegroom had gone. He might have offered to bring her home in his car. Certainly Miss Weaver had been there and the Mission tonga as well. But still, if a man wanted to do a thing he could always do it, thought Miss Baker, who was too intelligent a woman to think anything else. She lifted her short-sighted eyes and let them wander out into the sunflooded compound. Other women found a life of self-denial sufficient, she thought stumbingly. Why couldn't she? Because I love somebody, she said to herself passionately, and then staring and gasping a little as she saw the Collector's car come steering in at the gate.

And after that it was only about five minutes before she had all the facts at her finger-ends. "I'll come back with you. I feel that I may be able to be of use," she

said briefly, and she stood by the Collector's side and looked up at him.

"Come along, then," said the Collector. Miss Weaver, who had arrived on the scene, was amiably quiescent. She appreciated the Collector's frenzied anxiety as to Flavia's whereabouts. "Margaret is a sensible woman," she said generously, when Miss Baker had rushed away to pack a suitcase, "and can speak the language like a native."

"Yes," said the Collector simply. He suddenly felt very much happier. He felt that he was happier because Margaret Baker was so sane and sound and sensible, not realizing in the least that that was not it at all. Miss Weaver realized it, though. She saw his eyes following Margaret and envied her to the point of tears. And then she pulled herself together and replied intelligently to the Collector's quick words. No, certainly nothing could be done until Mr. Keston returned from his first investigations, she agreed. And then, of course, they would have to act.

And meanwhile, behind the softly flapping green bamboo curtain outside her bedroom door, Miss Baker crammed things into a suitcase and hated herself because, while Flavia was in such a terrible plight, she herself could be so insanely, so almost wickedly happy. Yes, the unmended silk stockings must go in too, she thought, tumbling them in on to the top of everything else. She could mend them later: in *his* house, thought Miss Baker, coming all ready out of her bedroom and not realizing a bit that the short-sighted eyes behind the clear glasses gave away her secret as effectively as if she had shouted it out loud.

CHAPTER XLIV

DIRECTLY Miss Baker came into the Collector's bungalow things seemed to be better. Everyone felt it, including Mrs. Metcalfe. Her sick anxiety receded a little. Miss Baker was so certain that Flavia would be found.

"Where?" gasped Mrs. Metcalfe, who seemed to have got thinner since Miss Baker had seen her the day before.

"I don't know that yet," said Miss Baker solidly. She was moving about the pretty bedroom that had been April's. Ayah was helping her, her thin olive-coloured fingers chill and trembling. Between the old bearer and the cook there was not much of ayah left. Both were old and devoted servants. Ayah had shamefully betrayed her trust notwithstanding that Wali Mohamed, the night before, had known all about it. But evil had come of her betrayal of trust. Therefore she was hideously culpable and to blame, and not even the half of her pay would remain for her own disposal that month, said the old bearer, able in the midst of his acute and very real anxiety to think complacently of his own pocket.

Meanwhile, after about a quarter of an hour spent in the bazaar the Police Superintendent had set the bonnet of his car towards the Kotpana Palace. At exactly seven o'clock it drew up under the old portico,

and the chowkidar, springing from his charpoy, raised his gnarled old hand stiffly to the salute.

"I wish to see Prince Hernam Singh," said Mr. Keston, speaking in the vernacular. "Show me at once to his apartment. I will follow you. . . ."

"Huzoor. . . ."

"Hurry," said the Police Superintendent significantly. The chowkidar led the way with his lathi held very tightly in his hand. Up the shallow stairs with the dust all lying in the corners of them they went. Past an evilly smelling oil lamp sputtering itself out into an odorous obscurity. Along a long corridor and up to a door outside which Punnoo, Prince Hernam Singh's devoted servant, squatted and crooned a little tuneless song to himself.

"The burra Police Sahib," gasped the chowkidar, who was old and had taken the stairs faster than he was accustomed to.

"Ari!" Punnoo was on his feet. He salaamed and stammered out that the Lord Sahib still slept.

"Then I'll wake him up," said Mr. Keston. He twisted the gilt doorhandle and walked straight into the room, shutting the door behind him. Glancing round, he noted that there was no movement from the large luxurious English bed in the corner. He walked quietly to the door that led into the dressing-room and bathroom. No, she was not there. He went over and stood close to the bed, removing his white helmet. Pale green sheets and pillow-cases And the olive-coloured face buried in them!

"Prince Hernam Singh," he said quietly.

"My God!" Prince Hernam Singh waked with a muffled yell. Then it had come, the vengeance of the British Raj for the outrage committed some fifty hours before. He sat up between the jade-coloured sheets, his expensive silk pyjamas making a bright splash of colour against them.

"Where is Miss Flavia Metcalfe?" demanded Mr Keston, and for one brief moment he wondered what he would do if he suddenly heard a voice say "Here!" and saw Flavia's golden head emerging from between the sheets. Mr. Keston had been very fond of April, but had not had much opinion of either Flavia's integrity or virtue.

"My God! how should I know?" stammered Prince Hernam Singh. He had been dreaming of Flavia. "In her uncle's house, I should hope."

"That's exactly where she isn't," said Mr. Keston briefly. "She was carried off from there either late last night or early this morning."

"Not possible," said Prince Hernam Singh, and his olive-coloured face took on a sickly pallor. His mother! Had he not known it since the beginning?

"I must search the Palace," said the Superintendent of Police, watching him. "Dress, and go and tell the Maharanee. I must go through the women's quarters."

"It is useless," chattered Prince Hernam Singh, beginning to get out of bed. "Search all you will and I will do all in my power to aid you. But in this Palace are underground dungeons that not even I know of. God! what shall I do if my mother has got hold of my Moonflower," almost screamed Prince Hernam Singh,

suddenly clutching the Police Superintendent by the arm.

"Hurry up and dress," said Mr. Keston laconically, and as the Prince padded across the marble floor into his dressing-room he strolled over to the window and stood staring out of it. Far, far below the river crawled slowly along between large bare rocks. Wide sandy stretches ran up close into sheltering clusters of trees. And yet, in the rains, even the tops of the trees were very often swept by the huge volume of water that came pouring down from the hills, thought the Police Superintendent, who had often seen it like that. And then his thoughts reverted to the matter in hand. There was no doubt about Prince Hernam Singh's innocence, that was one mercy. Mr. Keston rather liked the two Princes of Kotpana and he had a great esteem for their father, the old Maharajah. But the Maharanee . . . Like all European Police in India, Mr. Keston knew a great deal more than he appeared to do. Ah! the Prince was ready. He swung round and faced him.

"Follow me," said Prince Hernam Singh briefly. "But I warn you: we shall discover nothing."

"I can quite believe it," said Mr. Keston dryly. "But in any event we must have a very good try, mustn't we?"

CHAPTER XLV

BUT Prince Hernam Singh was perfectly right. Nothing could be discovered in the Palace. Heavily veiled and malignantly motionless the Maharanee sat hunched up on her low charpoy as Mr. Keston, with the Prince beside him, went carefully through her apartments. Brightly dressed women huddled in little groups, sat with their transparent veils drawn tightly across their faces as Mr. Keston and his escort walked through the quaint little courtyards open to the sky. And then he was taken to see the old Maharajah, white-haired and venerable in his austere and barely furnished apartment on the other side of the Palace. Prince Hernam Singh explained the Police Superintendent's errand, the old Maharajah listening in tremulous amazement.

"But I know of no such young lady," he said, and his old hands were trembling as they lay on his knees.

"Quite. I absolutely appreciate that, your Highness," said Mr. Keston courteously. "I regret exceedingly that I have had to intrude in this way. Now, having seen you, if you will allow me, I will withdraw."

"But . . ." and then the Maharajah shot a quick glance at his eldest son. Ah, this had come of that accursed three years in Oxford, he thought, when the Police Superintendent and Prince Hernam Singh had gone, sitting very still and resting his eyes on his

trembling hands. His honour trailed in the dust by his eldest son. Thank God, the younger one still remained, he thought, when Prince Rima, also alarmed and shaken by a brief interview with Mr. Keston, came in and sat down by his father and discussed what had happened in trembling tones.

"We can do nothing more here." Mr. Keston stood in the bright sunlight of the courtyard and the peak of his helmet cast a dark shadow over the lower part of his face.. "Now I must get back and communicate with Simla. No time must be lost, of course."

"My mother has her, I would swear it," stammered Prince Hernam Singh. "I know her only too well. Her first attempt proved abortive. She knows I love her, my Moonflower," gasped Prince Hernam Singh, not caring in the least what the Police Superintendent thought of him. "There is no devilry before which she would stand abashed to wrest her from my grasp."

"Then what would you suggest that we should do?" asked Mr. Keston. He stood and looked at the tall Indian in his beautifully-fitting English tailored suit. He was relieved to think that this man thought that Flavia was in the Palace. To him it seemed a better fate than to have been carried off by bandits, for instance. After all—a woman. . . .

"Against such a woman there is nothing that we can do," sobbed Prince Hernam Singh, losing control of himself.

"Nothing that we can do? Of course we can do something," said Mr. Keston impatiently. "I'll have the Palace searched by a detachment of the West Man-

chesters. I'll stop at nothing. I'll have the place razed to the ground if you really think Miss Metcalfe is in it."

"And hasten her end?" gasped Prince Hernam Singh. "To be flung to the crocodiles, or strangled and dropped into an underground well, of which there are many. I tell you that such methods are unavailing."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Mr. Keston, glancing down at his wrist-watch in the heavy leather strap.

"Strategy," said Prince Hernam Singh briefly.

"Such as . . ." Mr. Keston glanced away to where the car with the motionless sowar at the wheel stood placidly in the shadow of the overhanging porch. "Come along back to the Collector's bungalow with me," he said. "I must get along and we can talk as we go."

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CHAPTER XLVI

MISS BAKER agreed with Prince Hernam Singh that strategy was required to deal effectively with the problem of Flavia's disappearance. She also agreed with him that she was probably in the Kotpana Palace and that the whole thing had been engineered by the Maharanee, backed up, of course, by the disloyalty of the bulk of the educated Indians in Wandara, and their unshaken conviction that by now the British Raj had proved itself incapable of taking strong action even when it ought to.

"Because, of course, a great many of them must know all about it," she said, sitting at the wide office table with her large capable hands calmly folded on the green-baize top of it.

"Yes." The Collector looked at Miss Baker and reflected that he could ask nothing better than to get out of this accursed country and take this woman with him as his wife to look after him for the rest of his life and see that he wasn't worried. His thoughts wandered away from Flavia. He could retire next year if he liked: he had plenty to live on. He would ask Margaret Baker to marry him and see what she said, thought the Collector, suddenly feeling young and excited and as if life held something in it after all.

"Then what do you think we ought to do?" he said.

"Keep what has happened a complete secret for the next day or two," said Miss Baker. "Listen to this plan of mine and see what you think of it." She leant forward and began to speak. The three men listened attentively.

"I don't agree to it," said the Collector briefly when Miss Baker had finished speaking. "It's far too risky."

"For whom?" asked Miss Baker, her hands clenched in her lap.

"For you."

"I don't mind that," said Miss Baker, and her short-sighted eyes took on a queer radiance.

"But I do," said the Collector. He got up and began to walk about the room, frowning heavily.

"I think Miss Baker's plan an excellent one, Despard," said the Police Superintendent after a little pause. "Prince Hernam Singh is emphatic that Miss Metcalfe is in the Palace. If Miss Baker gets in there in disguise she will very soon find out if she is or not."

"She may come to some harm," said the Collector shortly, feeling it intolerable that a woman whom he had just decided to marry should be dragged away from him like this.

"I should do my utmost to see that Miss Baker did not come to any harm." interposed Prince Hernam Singh excitedly. "It would be simple for me to introduce her into the women's quarters dressed as an Indian. She speaks the language perfectly."

"I should like to get into the Palace as an ayah," said Miss Baker bluntly. "I'm not in the least afraid of anything. In that way I might be able to gain access to the Maharanee's apartment itself."

"Yes, that would be better still," agreed Prince Hernam Singh. "When, Miss Baker, could you be ready?"

"In about three hours' time," said Miss Baker. "I could write a note to Miss Weaver: get her to send me over a couple of saris and the rest of the native clothes that I should want. Start off from here in the car, and you could put me down in some isolated place and I could go the rest of the way on foot. I could leave here in my dust-coat so that no one would know what I had got on underneath."

There was a little silence. Mr. Keston got up. "Well, I'll get along to breakfast," he said, "it's just eleven. Prince Hernam Singh will come along with me, and we'll come back directly we've finished. So long, Despard," and the two men went out.

Left alone with Miss Baker the Collector got up and stood with his back to the closed office door.

"Look here, I won't have you do this insane thing," he said.

"Why not?" asked Miss Baker, and yet all the time she knew.

"Because I love you and want you," said the Collector. "I'm so slow and such a fool: I expect it's because I'm getting old. But I love you because you're so kind and good. I don't want you to go into horrid danger," he ended jerkily.

"Yes, but that's all the more reason why I should go—to make myself worthy of you," said Miss Baker steadily. She looked bravely at the Collector through her rising tears. "I'm not young either," she said, "but

perhaps that's all the more reason why I can appreciate the heaven that your love would mean to me."

"Margaret!" And then the Collector forgot that he was tired and sick of the country and that retirement seemed the only thing worth while. He sat down close to Miss Baker and took her capable hands in his. But she released one of them gently and took off her spectacles. "When you are close to me like this I can see you without them," she said. "I mean, I don't have to wear them always."

"No? I don't care what you've got to do or to wear as long as you love me," said the Collector boyishly. "But about this scheme. Margaret. . . ."

"You know I must go," said Miss Baker gently, and she patted one of his hands as it lay on her knee and then impulsively raised it to her mouth.

PART VI

CHAPTER XLVII

ONCE having been thought of the plan seemed perfectly simple. Four hours later Margaret Baker sat in the room that had been April's and smiled at Mrs. Metcalfe.

"My dear—I think it the most amazing disguise I've ever seen." Some of the drawn anxiety had already faded from Madeline Metcalfe's face. Prince Hernam Singh and Margaret were so certain that Flavia was at the Palace and only had to be looked for to be brought home again. They did not let Mrs. Metcalfe guess at the extreme anxiety that ravaged their minds. Because both knew of the Indian methods of vengeance a good deal better than Mrs. Metcalfe did.

"Would you have known me?" asked Margaret, her short-sighted brown eyes beaming from under the brightly-coloured sari that covered her head and part of her face.

"No," said Mrs. Metcalfe frankly. And then she held out her hands impulsively.

"Margaret," she breathed. "And Arthur tells me that you're going to be my sister. How perfectly heavenly!"

"Yes, but I've got a lot to do first," said Margaret, suddenly grave again. "I'll put on my coat and get ready to start," she said. "I believe my little tin trunk

is in the car. Prince Hernam Singh has already gone back to the Palace."

"Do take care of yourself." Mrs. Metcalfe, standing and holding Miss Baker's hands in hers, suddenly felt her agony of anxiety seize on her again.

"Trust me," said Margaret gravely. And then it was only a few minutes before she was in the car. In the long dust-coat and small felt hat that she generally wore she looked just as she always did, and the Collector was driving her himself—no chauffeur. Mr. Keston had agreed to it all, and had thought it a very excellent plan. But he had had a few words with Margaret alone when he had returned from his hurried breakfast.

"I need not tell you what a perfect devil the Maharanee of Kotpana is," he said, and he stood with his back against the closed door of the little office in which he and Margaret stood together.

"No," said Margaret, smiling slightly.

"My own opinion is that if she has got hold of Flavia the girl is already dead," he went on.

"Yes, so I think," said Margaret. "But it is worth while trying," she continued steadily.

"From the enquiries I have made—and my most reliable naik has spent a couple of hours in the bazaar"—went on Mr. Keston, "I feel pretty certain that Prince Hernam Singh is right and that the Maharanee is at the bottom of all this."

"Yes."

"Sedition is rampant here, as we all know very well," went on Mr. Keston. "But there would be nothing to gain by carrying off the Collector's niece. I mean to

say, if it was the work of ordinary marauders. It isn't as if we were near to the frontier, and then they could demand a ransom."

"No."

"Well, the very best of luck," said Mr. Keston after a little pause. "I shall have a plain-clothes man hanging about outside the Palace. Probably Murphy dressed as a Pathan, but that's only for your private information. Don't even tell the Prince."

"No, I won't," said Margaret simply. She took Mr. Keston's outstretched hand and gripped it.

"This is what I have always longed for," she said. "Something really exciting to happen to me. Thank you so much for agreeing to it all so quickly," and Margaret went away to change her clothes.

And now she sat in the car, so close to the Collector that she could lean against him if she wanted to. She did so and trembled a little at his quickly returned pressure.

"Just think; it doesn't seem as if it could possibly be true," she said after a little pause.

"What?" asked the Collector. "This loathsome plan of yours of being torn away from me just as I have got you? I agree with you, it is too horrible to be true."

"No, not that at all. The fact that you love me," said Margaret Baker gently.

"Yes, but—" and then the Collector drove resolutely on. He was ashamed of the way that Flavia's danger seemed suddenly not to matter at all. His own sister's child! he upbraided himself.

But Margaret understood. She sat silent for a

little while close up against his arm. And then she spoke.

"Put me down here," she said briefly. "There's not a soul in sight and I may be able to get a lift in a bullock-cart. It's a magnificent place."

"Oh my God!" but the Collector obeyed her. He stopped the car and they both got out and stood in the dust of the narrow lane close shut in between cactus hedges. The Collector took Margaret's illumined face between his hands. "I give you two days," he said, "and then I shall come and fetch you myself. Here's your box. You are not to attempt to carry it yourself."

"I shan't: trust me," said Margaret. She stood, small in her heelless slippers, wrapped in her sari, and watched the car go rolling back along the narrow lane. The Collector was backing and to his miserable eyes Margaret looked horribly alone and unprotected as she stood there with her brightly-coloured tin box beside her. But he knew the pluck and determination that lay behind her gentle exterior. Also he knew that the Police Superintendent was going to put Mr. Murphy somewhere in the vicinity of the Palace. He stopped for a moment and waved to her before he finally set the bonnet of the car towards Cantonments.

And Margaret, left alone, feeling that she was behaving dreadfully like a typical missionary but somehow not able to help it, dropped on her knees in the soft dry dust and uttered a little prayer of thanksgiving to God for having been so dreadfully, dreadfully kind to her.

CHAPTER XLVIII

MEANWHILE Prince Hernam Singh had got back to the Palace. He drove slowly because the terror of his love for Flavia had made him cautious. He too now had a part to play and he knew that it was vital that he should play it well. From his luxurious rooms he strolled along to pay a morning visit to the Maharanee his mother.

"Aha!" The Maharanee was sitting on her low charpoy, which, as the Prince noted, was more elaborately draped than usual. The short stumpy legs of it were not visible; in fact, the brightly coloured silk that covered it was trailing on the ground.

"Good morning, my mother." Prince Hernam Singh in his well-cut suit stood and smiled round the squalid room. His eyes rested on the squatting ayah who sat and spread out scarlet chillis on a sunlit corner of the boarded floor. He turned and glanced significantly at his mother.

"Chalo, Burial!" The Maharanee spoke peremptorily to the ayah, who got slowly up and went away. From under the folds of her sari she surveyed her son's impassive face and then rolled the little wad of pan to the opposite corner of her loose mouth.

Prince Hernam Singh sat down in a dilapidated English deck-chair plastered over with torn P. and O.

labels. It was his own discarded deck-chair that he had thrown away after his last return from leave. He looked squarely at his mother.

"Fine news," he said. "Such a to-do at the Collector's bungalow. She has gone off: the Miss-sahib Flavia."

"Gone off?"

"Yes, in the middle of the night. A fine girl that to do that thing. Some of your la-di-da military gentlemen I have no doubt," said Prince Hernam Singh scornfully.

"But . . ." the Maharanee was a clever woman. She looked closely at her son.

"Yes, but that wedding just showed me. . . . They are an arrogant race, these British," said Prince Hernam Singh. "Such a looking down of the nose at me and Rima, and all for what? I ask you. And such a pasty lot of women as they can muster," he said contemptuously.

"But had you not cast eyes of favour upon the Collector's niece?" enquired the Maharanee, and her pan-stained lips trembled as she asked the question.

"For a few hours, yes," replied Prince Hernam Singh carelessly and he got up from his chair. "But that was only a moment's folly. They are an unjust and cruel race also." Prince Hernam Singh suddenly spoke with heat. "The ayah that they have, discharged without even a warning. So far she came too, from Bombay side, procured by the ayah that has gone with the newly married one. I found her wandering and weeping as I drove here just a short half-hour ago. British justice! I put it to you," exclaimed Prince Hernam Singh excitedly.

"But why did you not bring her here?" demanded the Maharanee. Her mind was working busily. Information that she needed so terribly at her very hand. For had all her well-laid and expensive scheme been unnecessary? "This ayah? . . ." she glanced eagerly at her son.

"Too late. She will have wandered too far afield by now," returned Prince Hernam Singh placidly, strolling over to the narrow barred window and looking out of it.

"Search for her," insisted the Maharanee, suddenly rolling off the charpoy and waddling up to her son.

"Too late," said Prince Hernam Singh laconically. He turned and strolled past his mother, going close up to the charpoy. "A fine piece of silk this," he said, fingering the crumpled coverlet.

"Touch it not, it tears too swiftly," said the Maharanee. With padding footsteps she was suddenly beside him again. Rolling on to the bed again, she sat hunched up staring at him, her suspicions suddenly aroused. "Such a short few days and all so much altered," she sneered. "Such loud words and curses at the mother who bore you and all on account of the girl who has now fled with her lover."

"One lives and learns," said Prince Hernam Singh lightly. He glanced down at the small gold watch on his wrist. "Adieu," he said, "I go to pay a visit to my father."

"So be it," said the Maharanee and her still beautiful eyes yearned over her son. So tall and upright was he. A son to delight one's eyes indeed.

"Or perhaps I go to the Club to glean further news of the elopement," said Prince Hernam Singh, raising his eyes from his wrist-watch as if he was calculating if he had time enough to do it before the midday meal.

"Yes, that will be better," said the Maharanee eagerly. "And should you on the way encounter the ayah of whom you spoke, send her to me here. Buria becomes slow and tedious in her ministrations and mutters of a few days' leave required. This ayah could take her place: all that is required of her would be simple enough."

"I will do what I can," said Prince Hernam Singh, and he left the room slowly and carelessly. But once outside the heavy door of it he put his hand quickly to his heart. Had he done it already and with so little difficulty? He took the shallow marble stairs two at a time.

And a quarter of an hour later Margaret, who had padded through the dust on to the highroad dragging her small tin trunk with her, heard the shrill whistle of the Klaxon horn as Prince Hernam Singh in his huge saloon car came swinging round the corner. He drew up beside her with a scream of carelessly applied brakes.

"My God! I have done it," he gasped. "Get in behind and I will explain as we go along."

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CHAPTER XLIX

ONCE inside the Palace Margaret felt sure that if Flavia was there she would very soon find it out. And she did. It was late that same night that she heard the muffled cry of someone obviously trying to struggle free from a gag or something of the kind. Lying in her thick red rezais in the corner of the Maharanee's suffocating apartment, the dreadful sound came up to her straining ears. Under the floor! They had got Flavia somehow under the floor. How?—and where was the trap-door? With extreme caution she sat up. And as she sat up so did the Maharanee on her low charpoy also sit up. Perhaps she also had heard the stifled sound, thought Margaret, watching her from under the folds of her sari.

"The owls scream and disturb me," said the Maharanee fretfully. She tried through the dimness to see the face of this new ayah who had the day before waited on her so deftly and told her so graphically all that was going on in the Collector's bungalow. It had been a joyous day for the old Maharanee, the day that had just gone, and she had given Buria the ayah her week's leave and ten rupees as baksheesh for the holiday. Her son restored to her, and the death of the girl who had bewitched him a matter only of hours! And then the lifeless body flung

down the disused well: old Nana, the hamal belonging to the women's quarters, would do that for her for a couple of rupees. And now the fool had begun to scream. How had she enough life in her left to do that? thought the Maharanee crossly.

"Indeed the screaming of the owls is a noisome sound," said Margaret respectfully. She struggled herself out from her bedding and came swiftly over the floor to the low charpoy. Her mind was alert. The night before the Maharanee had refused to allow the heavy silk coverlet to be taken off the bed when it was prepared for the night. Then was there a trap-door of some kind underneath the bed? As Margaret stood there she cautiously passed her bare foot under it.

But there was a mat there, and a thick one too. Margaret drew back her foot and stood waiting. And as she waited she was conscious that through the thick darkness the Maharanee was watching her. Suspecting something perhaps. The choking atmosphere made Margaret suddenly feel sick. She struggled with herself.

"You are also wakeful," said the Maharanee suspiciously, fumbling with her heavy coverlet.

"I think continuously on the injustice that I have recently suffered," whined Margaret. "Such a loss of money and izzat¹ as it is. To be given notice and that for such a little fault. For how could I have prevented the elopement of the girl? Such a light-of-love how can one control?"

"True," agreed the Maharanee, and she was still watching Margaret closely. By the light of the little

¹ Prestige.

evil-smelling lamp nailed into the plaster wall she could see Margaret more plainly than Margaret realized. The rather large capable hands. The Maharanee suddenly felt that she did not want to run any more risks.

"I wish a lime soda," she said abruptly. "Nana, the old hamal, sleeps outside the door, command him. Often if I drink I sleep again."

"Huzoor," said Margaret respectfully.

"Or stay, I will command him myself," said the Maharanee. "A little change of air will perhaps restore my composure."

"Huzoor," said Margaret, hardly believing her ears. A chance for her to look under the bed. The instant the Maharanee had left the room she was down on her knees groping under the mat. Yes, a little round ring in what must be a trap-door. Margaret's heart was beating to suffocation. How could she get to the Prince to tell him? A signal to Mr. Murphy and the whole thing would be simple enough. Margaret stood up again.

"Ari! You arrange then my bed for me again?" said the Maharanee comfortably. "Truly I am fortunate in the ayah that my son has secured for me!" The old woman was standing surveying her from the doorway.

"The welfare of the Huzoor shall always be my one and only desire," said Margaret, standing with her rather cold hands clasped together and shivering a little. Had the old fiend seen? she wondered. Suddenly the still darkness of the tropical night seemed very

dreadful. She was so fearfully alone: the only person she could trust, namely Prince Hernam Singh, so far away on the other side of the Palace. Close at hand people who were in league with the Maharanee. Nana, the old hamal: Margaret had already seen his covetous old face and heard his servile whine as the Maharanee addressed him. He must know where Flavia was if any one did. Under her enveloping sari Margaret thought rapidly. Should she risk everything and rush to one of the narrow windows and flinging it open shriek for Mr. Murphy? But the windows were all barred and high up, and she would not be able to lean out. Supposing, too, he did not hear: then the game would indeed be up. She stood motionless.

Meanwhile the Maharanee had settled herself comfortably on the bed again. "The drink has refreshed me," she said amiably. "Thou art a good ayah to me and I like you. I will entrust you with a great secret as I know that you love the British no more than do I myself."

"Speak on, Huzoor," said Margaret, standing with her bare foot groping about under the bed. If she could move the mat and be perfectly certain about the ring it would be a step in the right direction. Then she would slip out after the Maharanee had gone to sleep again and rouse Prince Hernam Singh. She would get past the hamal somehow.

"I have the Collector's niece as prisoner in the Palace," said the Maharanee smoothly, plaiting the long fringe of her chuddah between her fingers as she spoke. "Even beneath this very floor she is awaiting

a speedy death. The cobra and his mate share with her the apartment. Their ways are swift and sure."

"Oh my God!" But Margaret did not say the words aloud. Only a chill terror crept down her spine.

"I like not to be thwarted and those who cross my will are apt to regret it," said the Maharanee slowly. "And now I wish to sleep again. Sleep thou also, and if the owl should hoot again, do not let it disturb you."

"Huzoor," said Margaret, and she went back to her corner. Crouched there she trembled. She would have to risk it somehow: directly the Maharanee began to snore again she would get out of the room and get to Prince Hernam Singh somehow. She began to say little bits of prayers to herself, trying to steady her thoughts. She stared up at the barred windows and saw a tiny star hanging lightly in the sky. Then God was there. "A very present help in trouble." Margaret murmured the familiar words, thinking that nobody realized them until they were up against it and had tried everything else. Why should it be so? A tiny shaft of white moonlight came creeping across the floor towards her. It fell across the bed, catching the light of something else that gleamed. The Maharanee's eyes. She was watching her and as wideawake as she was. Margaret shut her eyes again and began to say the Lord's Prayer very slowly to herself. What was she going to do now? Wait until the Maharanee went to sleep again? She would have to wait for that: it was hopeless to attempt anything until she did. The long dreadful minutes went on and on, and then at last the Maharanee drew a long snorting breath. Another—Margaret with infinite

caution crawled out from between the folds of her rezai. Across the floor to the door with her bare feet. To open it: ah, it was done; she gasped as the purer air filled her lungs. Now then . . . and then old Nana stirred and thrust his ugly old head out of his rezais.

And Nana wasted no time at all. The Maharanee had been very clear about that as she stood and snuffled over the edge of the thick tumbler with the lime and soda in it. If the ayah left the room during the night she was to be brought back to it at once and put where she would make no further trouble. Fifty rupees for old Nana if he did it all nicely and neatly and above all noiselessly. Fifty rupees was a lot of money for a covetous old man like Nana. A strong old man too, Margaret's sturdy shriek was effectually muffled by his cleverly flung blanket and tripping bare feet.

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CHAPTER L

SIMLA was at first inclined to be peevish. Certainly it was very dreadful that two Englishwomen should have disappeared one after the other, but these were difficult times. Conciliation, the wires between the two stations became very busy with this long word. Action eventually, of course, but conciliation first. Conciliation, the babu in the Simla head office took acute pleasure in rapping out this word.

"Conciliation be damned. To hell with their conciliation," raved the Collector, half beside himself. It was now a whole day since Prince Hernam Singh had arrived breathless from the Palace, crashing in at the white gate of the Collector's compound and tearing up the drive, and flinging himself out of the car to say that the morning after Miss Baker's arrival to take service with his mother she had disappeared, his mother's excuse being that she had been found unsatisfactory and had gone off with her luggage very early that morning, before the dawn. "And now am I left without any female attendant at all," wailed the Maharanee, sitting up on her charpoy and looking, to Prince Hernam Singh's straining eyes, unusually alert.

"But where do you suppose she's gone?" demanded the Collector, haggard and almost desperate in his sudden anxiety

"She has not gone at all. My mother has them both in some safe hiding-place," stuttered Prince Hernam Singh. "She is no ordinary woman that: she is devil," he stammered, beginning to cry.

And after that Mr. Despard got going and the Station was roused. Simla began to get majestic. Despard of course was nearing retirement or he would not dare to wire as he was doing. Insubordinate telegrams began to tick themselves out in front of the heavy tortoiseshell spectacles of the chief signaller. He sat with his legs curled up underneath him and spat frequently as he scribbled them down. While at Wandara the Collector and the General and the Police Superintendent sat together and asked one another what they should do. Should they behave like men and risk being broken or should they behave like cowards? "Risk being broken," said the General, who had not yet been in the country long enough to have gained his full pension on retirement but who suddenly felt that he did not care.

"What, smash the place to bits?" asked the Collector, Margaret's sweet short-sighted gaze torturingly before his eyes.

"No, not quite that. But raid the women's quarters," said Mr. Keston. "Both are there obviously, Prince Hernam Singh is certain of it."

"To-night, and we'll take about forty armed policemen with us. What do you say to that, Keston?"

"Excellent, and if you ask me it will have a very beneficial effect on the whole of the district," said Mr. Keston grimly. "Wasn't it Panton who told you that

he actually couldn't get transport when he wanted to go out into the districts last December?"

"It was," said the Collector.

"And yet Simla still talks of conciliation and rot like that."

"It does," said Mr. Despard suddenly expressing himself very rudely indeed.

"And don't they still weep and get sentimental at Home if we suggest a little curtailing of Mahatma Gandhi's activities?" enquired the General sarcastically.

"Don't," said Mr. Despard suddenly. "They say that Paget will be blind for life because of that rioting at Dalapur. It doesn't bear thinking of," said the Collector, getting up and walking away to the window.

And then the little conclave broke up. But everything was settled. That very night the Maharanee's apartment was to be stormed. "And if they break us, well, we shall know we've been broken in a good cause," said the General, suddenly wringing the Collector's hand and feeling that it was a relief to be able to behave like a man again.

CHAPTER LI

As Margaret fell her one thought was of the lurking cobra. And then she became briefly unconscious. Nana in his hurry to get rid of her and make sure of his fifty rupees had not cared particularly how he got her through the trap-door and Margaret had fallen heavily. And now, his task completed, he stood a little breathless and grinned servilely at the Maharanee.

"In the morning the reward is yours. Now leave me to sleep," said the old woman crossly. She stooped and grunted and rearranged her disordered and almost upturned bed like a busy old animal readjusting its nest. And then she lay down on it and dragged the rezais up to her chin and almost at once began to snore. Both of these female creatures gone to their death: a clumsy device of her son, this last one. But still, she would appear to him not to have guessed it. Easy enough, thought the wily old woman, settling her loose pan-stained lips with a purse of satisfaction.

And meanwhile Margaret had come to her senses. She sat up holding her head that felt odd and stupid. It was from the further corner that the sounds of a struggling whistling breath came . . . Margaret prayed and then stumblingly started to walk towards the sound. After all, there had been Daniel in the den of lions, she told herself, and she remembered the picture of it that had been in a book that she read to the younger

mission girls. Oddly enough the thought of that picture gave her courage. All the lions crouching back on their haunches and staring at Daniel. Perhaps they could see something that even he couldn't see. "He shall give His angels charge over thee. . . ." Margaret, walking rather uncertainly over the uneven floor, wondered where all the texts in her head were coming from. She must not speak too hurriedly to Flavia: Flavia, who had lain for more than twenty-four hours in this dark tomb of a place. As she walked towards her she began to murmur aloud. "It's Miss Baker, Miss Baker, Miss Baker," she whispered. "Come to take care of poor little frightened Flavia."

"Miss Baker!" Margaret, stooping, had found Flavia close up against the wall in the corner. She ran her hands over her, although now she was beginning to get accustomed to the darkness. It wasn't so dark as she had thought it was: light came from under the bottom of what looked like a door. Margaret had found Flavia's face and was struggling with the cloth that was tied over her mouth. She got it off. "Miss Baker," Flavia was whispering and shivering.

"Nothing to mind now, because I'm here." Margaret was by now her brisk capable self again.

"I believe there's a snake in that corner over there," said Flavia, her teeth chattering. She moved her hands and clutched wildly.

"Well, we'll get rid of it before we talk," said Margaret sensibly. She got up from her knees and turned round. "He shall give His angels charge over thee." How amazing it was when you really began to think about it as something practical, meditated Margaret,

walking towards the dim distant corner and making a shuffling noise with her heelless shoes.

"Gone!" Margaret spoke with satisfaction as she watched. From the dim corner a long silent shape had moved and writhed its way across the floor and out under the crack at the bottom of the door. Was there another? Cobras always hunted in couples, as Margaret knew. No, apparently not at the moment. Margaret went back to Flavia, wishing as she had never wished anything before that she had brought her electric torch with her. She had, but it was in the little tin trunk up above. She felt a queer lightheartedness, an exaltation—a wonderful feeling as if they were both suddenly quite close to God. They undoubtedly were, thought Margaret, sitting down by Flavia and feeling for her hand.

"How did you get here?" asked Flavia in a very low, quiet voice. She was probably hungry, thought Margaret grimly, asking her briefly.

"Yes, I am," said Flavia. "But thirsty most. This place is much bigger than you think it is. I have been moving about until I lay down because I was so tired. There is water in there. I am dying of thirst," gasped Flavia suddenly, crumpling forward with her head sideways.

"In there." Then there must be another room as well as this. Margaret got up. Amazing, it hardly seemed dark at all now. She hurried towards what was obviously a space where there had once been a door. Yes, and an inner room through it and a large earthenware gurrah with an enamel mug stuck in the mouth of it. A native, however diabolical his intention, will

rarely deny his victim water. Margaret tipped the gurrah a very little, filled the mug and hurried back with it.

"Ah!" Flavia drank as Margaret supported her head. "I know now what Christ must have felt on the Cross," she gasped. "I never thought of it before. But then I don't think I have ever been really thirsty before."

"No," said Margaret, and she set the mug down on the floor and stared before her into the darkness. Odd that they should both think of religious things, she meditated. "You know, we've got to get out of this, Flavia," she said after a little pause. "How are we going to do it?"

"Tell me first how you got here," said Flavia weakly.

"Tell me first what clothes you have got on," said Margaret, feeling Flavia trembling.

"Hardly any, because I was in bed when they took me," said Flavia. "But they rolled me in a rezais and that has kept me warm."

"I see." Margaret sat with her knees drawn up to her chin. "I got here like this," she said, and then she told her.

"Angel," said Flavia briefly and she began to choke. "And all I could do on that ship and after was to scoff at you because you were a missionary," she said.

"And now I'm really and truly going to be a relation of yours as well as a missionary," said Miss Baker blithely. For a moment the horror of the plight in which they found themselves died away from Margaret's mind and left only the thought of her lover behind.

"Oh, how glad I am," said Flavia softly, as Margaret

told her. And then both sat silent for a moment or two. Flavia broke the silence first.

"Does anyone know that we're here?" she asked.

"Probably Prince Hernam Singh will guess," said Margaret.

"Oh! him. . . ." Flavia shivered.

"Dear, this has nothing to do with the Prince," said Margaret quietly.

"No, I know it hasn't," said Flavia. "And yet in a way it has. It's all part of the same thing, India and the Indian. Oh, how I loathe them, loathe them!" said Flavia, shivering violently.

So that was going to be the end of Prince Hernam Singh's romance. Margaret suddenly felt terribly sorry for him. Hoping wildly, as of course he was, that once his Moonflower had been rescued from his mother's clutches she would be his. Poor brute. . . . Margaret sat silent and thought about him for a moment or two.

"Do you suppose we shall ever get out?" asked Flavia after a long shuddering silence.

"Yes," said Margaret brightly. "I'm going to try to find out exactly where we are, I mean, exactly where this cellar place faces. I know what's on the top of it," she chuckled softly. "I can almost hear the old wretch snoring at this very moment."

"How can you laugh?" said Flavia weakly. She lay back as Margaret got up and moved away from her. Terror had played havoc with Flavia. She suddenly stood up and began to scream Margaret's name.

"Here, here, silly little child," said Margaret cheerfully, wondering what Flavia would do if she knew how she herself was sick with fear. Because so far as she

could see their plight was absolutely hopeless. Apparently this underground place was built up against an outer wall, so that the light that came under the massive wooden door was really not from the outer air at all. It came down a sort of shaft place; Margaret with infinite patience had managed to see through a crack in one of the beams of the door. Probably in the old days of bandits and raids it had been used as a hiding-place, as it was being used very effectually now.

She caressed Flavia, holding her close to her side. "Child, go and wrap yourself up in your rezais," she said. "Only that thin nightdress, you'll die with cold. Goose! what are you crying about?"

"We shall die here of starvation," chattered Flavia. "We shall live for weeks and weeks—you can without food. You see about people who do it in the papers," she sobbed hysterically.

"Rubbish," said Margaret robustly, laughing with white lips. "We shall be at home again by this evening and you will have forgotten about it all. Aren't you and your mother going to Agra? Yes, of course you are, I saw your trunks all packed before I came away yesterday." Margaret stopped speaking as something stealthy seemed to stir in the crack of light under the door. Yes, it was coming back again: it must have a nest here. . . . Margaret stooped to the uneven floor; picked up a small loose stone and threw it. The streak of light lay unbroken again.

"Why did you do that?" asked Flavia, stooping to drag her rezais round her again.

"To see if I could hear it fall anywhere, so as to give us an idea where we were," lied Margaret gaily.

CHAPTER LII

By ten o'clock that night Margaret had to repeat a great many hymns to herself to keep herself from becoming hysterical. Flavia was more or less hysterical already. Thirty-six hours without food coupled with an overwhelming terror had reduced her self-control to a minimum. The hours had gone like lead ; each one seemed like three ordinary hours. The cracked old clock from the Palace tower kept them aware of the time ; if it hadn't been for that Margaret would have thought that they had been there a week. She suggested one senseless game after another. "I have a basket, what have I in it?" proved a success at first. They did it all through the alphabet and then Margaret jovially suggested beginning it again. But when they had got as far as D, for the second time, Flavia said, "You have Death in it." And somehow that very effectually killed any joy in the game.

Also now that it had got dark Margaret, also dreadfully hungry, began to be terrified of the snake again. She flagellated herself for this. God was still there although she was terribly hungry. But want of food seemed to make Him further away. How could that be? argued Margaret, because want of physical sustenance should make you more dependent on spiritual sustenance. You were dependent and yet you could

not feel the dependence, thought Margaret, feeling silly and exalted and yet deadly, deadly afraid all the time. She and Flavia sat huddled together listening to the sounds that came from overhead. The Maharanee talking to Prince Hernam Singh—but that had been quite early in the morning. And when she had heard that Margaret had warned Flavia that she was going to scream and had done so not once but many times. But Prince Hernam Singh had not heard her. The floor between the two rooms was so thick that you could not hear unless you actually had your ear close to the boards. Margaret really knew that quite well although she thought it was worth trying. But now they only sat huddled together silently. Margaret praying mechanically. Little bits that she remembered out of "Acts of Devotion." The Collect about "safe lodging." Safe lodging with God, that was what it was coming to. But she had so wanted safe lodging with the man who had just told her that he loved her, thought Margaret, thinking about God with a little quiet sob because somehow she knew how He was suffering with her in all this terror and dread.

And meanwhile the General and Mr. Despard and Mr. Keston with Mr. Murphy and a nice little posse of armed policemen had crept up quite close to the Palace and were enjoying it all dreadfully. In India it gets dark at about six in the evening, so that it had been quite easy to get there without being noticed. Prince Hernam Singh was going to see that they got into the Palace all right, and Mr. Murphy, disguised as a Pathan, with a sturdy lathi in his hand, was going

to tackle the chowkidar and thereby divert his attention from the rest of the party, who would meanwhile get in at another door. The General, who had no particular interest in the scheme beyond a love of adventure and a passionate desire to have a whack at Simla, was enjoying himself most. The others, especially Mr. Despard and Mr. Murphy, had too much at stake. They stood in the thick circle of trees that fringed the river and fidgeted and looked at their watches. "When shall we push off?" asked the General, who was smoking a cheroot and who took it out and stared at the burning end of it as he spoke.

"Hernam Singh is going to flash his electric lamp out of his window when it is safe," said Mr. Keston briefly. "In about another quarter of an hour I should say it would be."

"What time is it now?"

"Ten exactly."

"I hope I see some of the better-looking of the fairies," chuckled the General naughtily. "I've never been in a harem and always wanted to be."

"They're all as ugly as sin," said Mr. Keston shortly. "Naik!"

"Sahib?" A tall bearded Mohammedan stepped forward.

"Everything ready?"

"Hain, sahib," said the Mohammedan, saluting.

"Right. Another ten minutes or so, I should say," said Mr. Keston, and the Naik stepped back into the darkness again.

And then it was only a minute or two before Prince

Hernam Singh's little signal winked high above the trees. "Stout fella!" The General had thrown his cheroot into the damp undergrowth and got up on to his feet. The Police Superintendent was in command of this little adventure and the General in mufti was enjoying the feeling of being under orders. The tramp of quiet feet moved towards the Palace. Murphy, by Gad! that's a tip for the next Yacht Club fancy dress ball, thought the General, who could never be serious about anything unless he had to be, and was excited at seeing Mr. Murphy dressed up. And he found it even more difficult to be serious a few minutes later because Mr. Keston had briefly ordered him to be responsible for the safe custody of the Maharanee. The entrance into the Palace had gone off without a hitch. The police were even now surrounding the women's quarters and had old Nana in handcuffs. And the General stood and requested the abruptly roused Maharanee to get off her bed. "I am sorry to disturb you, madam," said the General, tall and dignified in his striped flannel suit and speaking in fluent Hindustani. "But it is inevitable."

"This is an outrage. The British Government . . ." the Maharanee was yelling and sputtering with rage.

"Quite, but you've got something here that we want, and we think it may be under your bed," said the General politely. "Help me to drag the whole caboodle away, Despard." And then he laughed softly. "Madam, I have never yet struck a woman," he said blandly. "But if you attempt to bite me I am afraid I shall be obliged to break my rule."

And with the bed shoved out of the way it was easy enough. Prince Hernam Singh, standing in an agony in his room listening, knew that it would be Mr. Murphy, curse him, who would first have Flavia in his arms. The white light from their electric torches would shine first on her sweet delicate face. What chance had he? Prince Hernam Singh, with the bitterness of death in his heart, went raging up and down his room.

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CHAPTER LIII

AND of course he hadn't the remotest chance, that was obvious from the very first. At the sight of a dark face Flavia screamed and screamed and screamed again: "Mummy, don't let them come *in*!" From the small bed in the middle of the floor she would lie and stare wildly at the door while Mrs. Metcalfe held her tenderly in her arms, soothing her as best she could. So the District Surgeon said that it must be Home for Flavia as soon as she was well enough to be moved. And Mrs. Metcalfe was ashamed of the flood of joy that swept over her at the thought. Because Home meant John and the protection of his love, and nobody but Madeline Metcalfe knew quite what that was, although in the middle of her own happiness she was able to think very sadly of Prince Hernam Singh.

"It's awfully sad for him," she said to her brother. "Especially as Flavia has taken presents from him. Just look at these: she had just told me where they were, locked up in her jewel case. She wants them to go back. Isn't it appalling to think that she should have taken them?"

"Appalling," said the Collector, holding the two jewels in the palm of his hand. "But if you ask me I think all that she has gone through will be the making of Flavia. Although I am very sorry that

Prince Hernam Singh should suffer. Especially as it's our own damned fault for encouraging the two races to mix. I'll give them back to him. . . ." And the Collector went away to shut them up in his safe.

So that danger was averted and everyone in the Collector's bungalow felt more or less at ease again. Especially as Simla had taken the affair of raiding the Kotpana Palace uncommonly well. In fact, they had gone so far as to back Mr. Keston up in his drastic action, because Simla was now badly worried by news from other parts of India and was feeling that soon it would have to be drastic itself. The Maharanee was being sent off to Kashmir for an indefinite period, and the Maharajah had been told as courteously as possible that five out of his salute of fifteen guns had been cancelled, and that if he could not keep his wife in order himself the British Government would have to do it for him. Now only Prince Hernam Singh's misery remained. And how was that to be assuaged? he wondered, pacing up and down his own apartment with the vivid memory of his recent interview with the Collector ravaging his mind.

"You had better not come here again, Prince," the Collector had said kindly. "My niece is not in a fit condition to see you, even if we thought it advisable."

"Sir!"

"And she has asked me to give you these," continued the Collector, holding out two winking jewels in his hand.

"Sir!"

"She had no business to take them," continued the

Collector gravely. "It was good of you to give her so valuable a present notwithstanding. Believe me, it hurts me very much indeed to pain you by giving them back again." And as that was obviously the end of the interview Prince Hernam Singh went away. But as he went rushing back to the Palace in the powerful car, a cloud of dust blotting out all the landscape round it, his heart was white-hot with misery and rage. And now he went up and down his room with the stealthy tread of a wild animal behind bars. His mother, he would seek her out and tell her what he really thought of her before it was too late.

But standing there in her disordered apartment with her open boxes round her the Maharanee got in first. She cursed him for having been born her son and for his fruitless marriage. She cursed him for the disaster that he had brought on the Palace and the inhabitants of it. His doing, all of this, for having allowed his eyes to stray towards an English girl. "Would that she had died from the bite of a cobra as I had intended," she screamed. "A fitting death indeed for a light-of-love like that."

"How dare you!" blazed Prince Hernam Singh, beside himself with rage. He stood and cursed his mother violently and dreadfully. And then, blind with passion and misery, he stumbled out of her room. Old Nana, the hamal, watched him go, and so a little later was able to explain it all to the abruptly summoned District Surgeon.

"So swiftly did his Highness go that he saw not the top step and therefore missed it," stuttered old Nana,

terribly afraid that he might in some way be considered responsible for this abrupt decease of the eldest son of the house, who lay queerly crumpled at the foot of the long flight of marble steps. A broken neck. A little later the District Surgeon, standing beside Prince Hernam Singh's luxurious bed and looking down on his dark peaceful face, thought that this was an uncommonly good way out of an uncommonly difficult situation. Because, of course, everyone in the Station had known about his infatuation for Flavia and the hopeless unsuitability of it. Especially since this last dreadful affair, for the District Surgeon had been the first to see Flavia after her thirty-six hours' incarceration and had instantly insisted that as soon as she was fit to be moved she must get away from the East.


So that affair was settled. And John Maxwell, a few thousands of miles away, sitting at his table in the spacious room at the South Kensington Museum, wondered what dreadful news was contained in this last Eastern Telegraph envelope that had just been handed to him. He took it from the man in uniform and nodded to him to go away. This would be some dreadful news about the woman he loved, he thought. He opened it with his fingers trembling.

But it was good news. John Maxwell put the telegram down and sat quite still for a moment or two. And then he took it up again and the corners of his delightful mouth twitched. Madeline had spared no expense in order to make everything clear.

"Flavia is much better and is engaged to Mr. Murphy. We are both coming home in a fortnight. Think, only

a month until I see you again. I can't believe it, it is too heavenly."

Yes, it was heavenly indeed. John Maxwell folded up the telegram and put it in his pocket and then sat and looked out of the window. Odd that he had not noticed before that the laburnum in the gardens round the Museum was in flower. All golden and trembling and breathing of Spring. Spring! Spring, although a belated one for himself and the woman he loved, thought John Maxwell, deciding that he had done enough work for that day and beginning to put his papers neatly away in the file that lay ready for them.



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